



SPICE & WOLF

Vol. 22

Spring Log V

ISUNA HASEKURA

SPIGE & WOLF

Vol. 22

SPRING LOG V

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
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MISTRESS OF
SPICE AND WOLF
BATHHOUSE
HOLO THE WISEWOLF

THE COUPLE'S
FRIEND AND A
DEVOUT PRIESTESS
ELSA

ACORN BREAD
AND WOLF

HOLO STOOD THERE WITH AN OBVIOUS GLOWER,
AND ELSA TURNED TO LOOK AT LAWRENCE.

"I AM HAPPY TO SEE YOU TWO SO CLOSE,
BUT ARE YOU PERHAPS SPOILING YOUR
PARTNER A LITTLE TOO MUCH?"
ELSA SCOLDED HIM, AND HE HAD NO CHOICE
BUT TO OFFER A HUMBLE APOLOGY.
"SEE, HOLO—COLD WATER FEELS GOOD, TOO."



A SQUIRREL AVATAR
THAT LIVES ON A
CURSED MOUNTAIN
TANYA



"HEY,
YOU'RE
THE PRIEST
AND THE
CHAPERONE,
RIGHT?"

A NOBLE BRIDE BOUND
BY TRADITION
ARTE PRISTOL

THE YOUNG MAN
WITH HOPES OF
BECOMING A PRIEST
TOTE COL

THE DAUGHTER OF THE
WISEWOLF AND THE MERCHANT
MYURI

A WEDDING FOR WOLVES

"IF WORD GETS TO HIM THAT MY
BROTHER AND I PLAYED PRETEND
AT A WEDDING, THEN MY DAD
MIGHT FAINT."



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SPICE & WOLF

VOLUME XXII
SPRING LOG V

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JYUU AYAKURA


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ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

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OOKAMI TO KOSHINRYO

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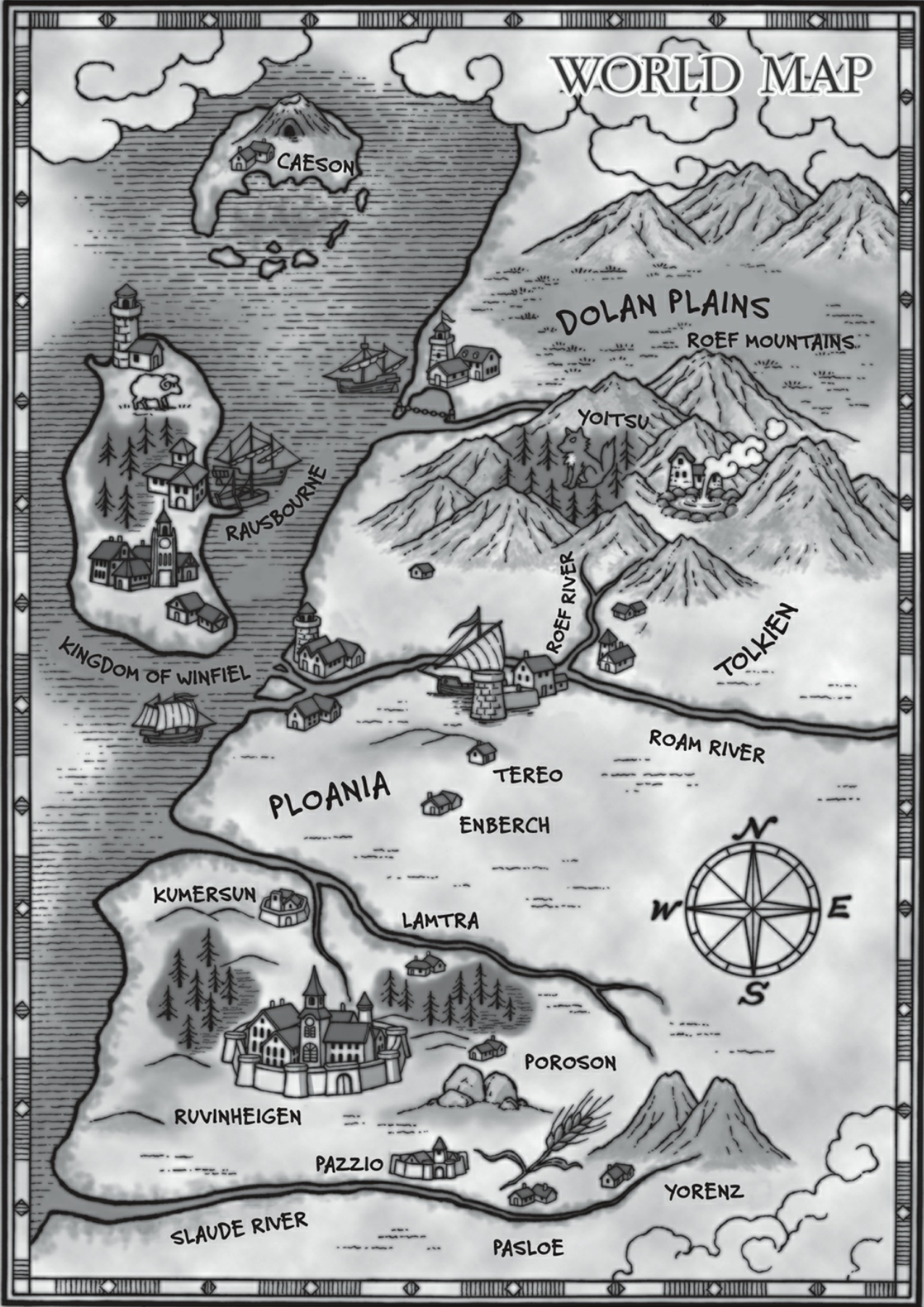
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

ACORN
BREAD
AND
WOLF



ACORN BREAD AND WOLF

When Lawrence returned from his errands and swung open the door to the inn, he found someone standing inside.

Her silky, flaxen-colored hair and slender physique showed she was clearly a stranger to physical labor and made her seem like the daughter of a noble family. She was young, perhaps in her mid-teens, yet the way she stood with her body leaning back, arms crossed, and feet planted shoulder width apart afforded her an oddly commanding presence.

She wore a scowl, with deep ridges etched into her furrowed brow. To anyone else, she probably looked like a livid wife who was finally fed up with a husband who frivoleed away all his time in idle amusement and had made up her mind to teach him a lesson once and for all.

But even as Lawrence closed the door behind him, she didn't so much as glance his way.

She continued standing stock-still, staring at a piece of paper affixed to the wall.

If memory served him correctly, she was in the exact same spot as when he left.

Lawrence, once a rather famous traveling merchant and currently the master of a Nyohhira bathhouse, posed a question to his wife of a little more than ten years, Holo.

“What's got you in such a mood?”

As he was in the process of shedding his coin purse and dagger to place them on the table, Holo inhaled deeply enough to bend herself over even further and spat, “This painting will last for years to come. I would like to avoid seeing a shoddy rendition of myself in several centuries' time.”

Lawrence did not take her words as an exaggeration.

After all, Holo was not the little girl she appeared to be. Her true form was a massive, towering wolf, a being of legend who resided in wheat and held sway over the harvest. If the painting really did persist for centuries, then it was entirely possible that she may come upon it many years later.

While Lawrence understood that she thought it would be a grave problem if the final product was disappointing, there was something that still puzzled him.

“Weren’t you thrilled by the idea at first?”

Holo paid Lawrence’s comment no heed.

He breathed a tired sigh and glanced at the picture on the wall. He spotted a rough charcoal sketch of Lawrence and Holo that would eventually be part of a much larger scene.

The commissioning of this work had been necessary in settling the commotion that had suddenly swept through the port town of Atiph, where they were staying. As recompense for getting caught up in the uproar, he had arranged for both of them to be included in the painting.

The chance to leave behind your likeness in a work of art was remarkably rare, barring members of the nobility. And given that they didn’t pay a single coin for the privilege, there was little to complain about. Even so, Holo seemed to have plenty to say.

From Lawrence’s perspective, even if they got to be in the painting for free, there was little point if Holo was unhappy. This was all for her sake to begin with.

Holo would live on for hundreds of years. She was already filling her diary with every little moment to preserve them for the future. And unlike words, which were limited in what they could express, a painting could immortalize exactly how they looked now.

That was why Holo had been thrilled when she first learned they would have a place in this painting. Naturally, being painted was a novel and exciting experience for her.

After receiving one of the several sketches the artist had done of them, Holo had stared so hard at it that she nearly got some charcoal on the tip of her nose. Given the grin that crossed her face and how her vaunted tail immediately started wagging, it was rather obvious what she thought.

However, starting two day ago, she began giving the sketch hard looks, as though something did not sit right with her.

“I admit, there is little danger this will be a shoddy work. It is drawn rather skillfully.”

If anything, Lawrence thought they looked even better in the painting than real life, but he would be torn limb from limb if he said that out loud, so of course he stayed silent.

Whether she knew how Lawrence felt or not, Holo breathed a sigh from her nose.

“My beauty certainly has been captured well. But this will be around for centuries. Many will lay eyes upon it, and some may even know me personally. What will happen when all that has been captured is my loveliness? The wisewolf will be stripped of her majesty!”

She planted her hands on her hips and huffed, a gesture that made her look even younger than she did in the picture.

Holo could be rather childish despite how many centuries she had been alive.

For a short while after they met, Lawrence figured that she merely put on an act to match the youthful appearance of her human form, but after running a bathhouse in Nyohhira and coming in contact with many elderly, powerful patrons, there was something he had come to profoundly believe: The older one became, the more childish they acted.

And that was to say nothing of a wolf who had lived for hundreds of years.

“You say that, but everything about this painting, including the subject matter, has long since been decided beforehand. You’ve been watching them work, right? There’s no room for a regular old bathhouse owner to give input. Honestly, the sheer scale took me by surprise, too.”

The commission came from a wealthy merchant group whose members hailed from every land, and all of them engaged in the port town of Atiph's herring egg trade. This market was extremely speculative, making it almost like a socially acceptable form of gambling, and was so popular that great merchants from faraway lands would come running when it was time for herring mating season. The potential for vice caught the eye of a young priest who felt compelled to crack down on the practice amid the Church reforms that were currently sweeping the world. Just as the year's bets were about to be placed and the merchants' anticipation peaked, the market ground to a halt. That was where Lawrence's quick wit and Holo's helping hand won over the hardheaded priest.

The commissioning of this painting had been one part of winning over the priest, but it was not just a quick doodle to put in a frame so that the wealthy merchants could keep their playground where the lucky had a chance to become rich overnight. This was a grand project where they first layered stucco on one of the walls in the fish egg exchange and would then paint the massive mural on top of that. Counting all the artists and their apprentices, dozens of people were working on it.

At present, wooden scaffolding covered every part of the building where the painting would be worked on. The region's stonemasons and carpenters had gathered, toiling under the direction of the artisan association that was overseeing construction.

Once a project this monumental was completed, there was no question that word of it would spread across the land.

Lawrence had no idea how a humble bathhouse owner would even begin to say, *My wife doesn't want to be depicted as cute and only cute...*, in the face of such a grand and expensive endeavor.

"But is it not your way to undertake the impossible all for the sake of great profit?! And am I not your most precious companion?! What greater riches could there possibly be besides my happiness?!"

Holo punctuated her words by forcefully pointing her finger at him, but Lawrence simply shrugged.

“Well, I do always get scolded for my get-rich-quick schemes.”

Of course, the one who berated him for his reckless plans was none other than Holo, who had a surprisingly conservative side to her.

“Besides, you already come across as plenty dignified in this drawing.”

“...”

Holo’s incredible ears could detect lies.

The way she tightly pursed her lips made it clear that she could tell Lawrence was not lying. However, the reason she ground her teeth so hard that it made her scowl was because she could not understand why he was not lying.

Lawrence flashed a brief smile before sharing his secret.

“At least for me—whenever I look at this drawing, my face gets all tense.”

After all, the only reason they had become involved in the uproar that led to the creation of this painting was because Lawrence had nearly collected on his stake in the herring egg trade. On top of that, Holo had unexpectedly become engrossed in the part-time job she had found and set to work with a zeal while the whole incident was going on. That was more than enough reason for him to break out into a sweat.

In essence, he was a useless husband who had taken all the money his wife had slowly saved up from honest work and frivoled it away on gambling.

“All you ever do is deceive me!”

“We’ve been together for more than ten years. I’ve learned a thing or two about how to handle you.”

“You fool!”

Lawrence muttered “And what a fool I am” with a shrug, then glanced outside the wood-frame window.

“More importantly, should we start looking for a place to eat? There are loads of artisans being called into town, so everything’ll be crowded by the time the sun goes down.”

Since they had both lived on the road before opening the bathhouse, Holo

understood well. If they wasted time bickering, then they might end up with a meal of bland wheat porridge and raw garlic.

“Hmph. You just narrowly escaped with your life!”

“It might not be a very long life until my next payment.”

Holo raised her eyebrows and wordlessly smacked Lawrence on the back. Then once she pulled her cloak over her head, she grumpily tucked her twitching tail underneath.

The port town of Atiph where Lawrence and Holo were staying had always been a thriving center of commerce, but recently it was busier than ever. The main plaza was packed with new arrivals who were fascinated by the hustle and bustle of the harbor. Local farmers had also come into town to sell their pigs and chickens while looking for some fish to buy. To top it all off, droves of sailors and porters flowed in and out of the boats at dock.

With the massive influx of people, food was disappearing from the stalls at an alarming rate, so Lawrence and Holo split up to get their dinner. As a woman of beauty and poise, Holo was often treated favorably when she shopped for food, so she made her rounds among the mutton and fish stalls while Lawrence went to secure them some alcohol.

He decided on a stall that sold liquor in bulk where customers were elbowing one another as they tried to order. As the saying went, *Food has no taste without drink*. In any case, Lawrence somehow managed to buy some for himself.

As he staggered away, a familiar voice reached his ears.

“Over here, dear! Here!”

The sharp-sighted Holo had saved them a spot at a cluster of standing tables nestled in the alleyway between two inns.

“Oh ho, what fragrant wine. I was growing tired of mountain cider.”

Holo enjoyed sour cider made from gooseberries and the like, but for a meal of fried fish and still-sizzling mutton, cold ale or wine was the obvious choice.

“Was there no ale?”

As expected, she asked about it almost immediately.

“The only reason I was even able to get this much was because it was the pricey stuff. People are practically coming to blows trying to snatch cheap ale and cider from one another.”

Holo made no claims that he was merely exaggerating. She had been able to get a general idea of how rowdy the port was with just a twitch of the ears sheltering under her hood. If anything, she was probably thinking how well Lawrence had done given the circumstances.

“Seems like you gathered quite the haul. This is an impressive spread.”

By the time Lawrence finished his comment and grabbed a skewer of mutton, Holo was already removing the stopper. Lawrence couldn’t help but smile as he watched her drink straight from the cask that was as large as her face. He knew it would be futile scolding her for gulping what he had intended to be several days’ worth of wine.

The men at nearby tables stared in amazement while they watched Holo take a deep swig. When she finally came up for air with a satisfied “Haaaah!” and a full smile, they all started whooping.

The way Holo ate and drank was always a crowd-pleaser wherever they traveled, likely because of how it contrasted with her appearance—she looked like a traveling nun if she quietly sat still. Lawrence had no idea how many times he had been tempted to turn the whole thing into a show, charging money to cover some small part of their ever-growing food expenses.

“*Burp.* Aye, ’tis good wine,” Holo remarked as she lapped up some extra that had spilled from the corner of her mouth before reaching for a piece of fried fish. Despite how much she used to complain about hating fish, saying it never filled her stomach, Holo had become enamored by how delicious fresh seafood could be—salted fish were still a very different story—ever since they had started staying in the port town. As Lawrence continued watching her out of the corner of his eye, he brought the cask up to his own lips and enjoyed the fresh scent of grapes filling his nostrils.

“Well, ’twas easy for me.”

“Hmm?”

As Lawrence bit into the crunchy fried fish, he glanced up when Holo spoke.

“Oh, you’re talking about gathering food.”

“Yes. I stood nervously on the edge of a crowd, when a big, muscly bear of a man put me on his shoulders and kicked the other customers out of the way. I ordered from atop his shoulders, received my food, and when I gave him a skewer as thanks, he was delighted.” She sounded particularly smug as she recalled the moment.

Though her acting like a hapless nun who had been dispatched on an errand was very convincing, Holo was as crafty as ever. And if he even showed a glimmer of emotion that expressed how scandalous most would think it was for a wife to ride on some random man’s shoulders, he knew she would happily wag that tail of hers and pounce in an instant.

As Lawrence carefully avoided the traps she had planted and pretended not to notice them, he launched his own little counterattack.

“You sure are using your cuteness to your heart’s content despite how much you complained about the painting.”

When Holo heard his slightly exasperated tone as she moved on from fish to mutton, she bit into her meat, canines glinting.

“Fool. I was only complaining about how troubling it would be if others thought I am nothing beyond my looks.”

“...Is that so?”

Lawrence sighed and reached for the wine cask, but Holo snatched it away first.

“*Gulp, gulp...pwah!* So? What have you been doing these past few days, leaving me alone in the room during the day?”

Every dish tasted especially salty, perhaps because the sea was only a stone’s throw away, which made them even thirstier than usual. Lawrence didn’t want Holo getting sick from drinking too much, so he prepared some wheat bread for her as he replied, “Exchanging coins.”

“Oh?”

He ripped a hole in the bread, stuck some of the mutton from the skewers and a cut of cheese into the pocket, topped them with a bit of sauce made from mustard seeds, then placed the finished product before Holo. She would keep on eating nothing but meat if left to her own devices. One of the ears under her hood twitched in dissatisfaction as she pulled open the pocket and added a few more slices of meat before finally biting into the now-bulging piece of bread.

“I took a lot of money with me when we left Nyohhira, remember? Now that I’ve met the bishop in this town, I was wondering if I could use his connections to get the money exchanged for small coins.”

It was a good thing for the world to be experiencing a great period of prosperity, but the resulting shortage of coins was rather troubling for everyone who wanted to buy and sell goods. When Lawrence departed from Nyohhira, he had been saddled with the bothersome duty to obtain low-denomination coins.

“Mm. *Gnh, ohm...gulp*. Why must you go out every day? Can you not finish this in one trip?”

“There are a lot of people with similar requests, so there’s a huge wait. I got in line three days ago, and it was only today that I finally got an audience.”

The queue was so long that the town guards came at every sunset to distribute wooden tags among all those still waiting their turn so everyone would line up in the same order the next day. And so while he got a good night’s rest at the inn, Lawrence spent his entire day standing.

And when those starting up new enterprises to stand in line for others in the hopes of scoring a tip began appearing as the natural course of things, Lawrence chanted mantras of frugality to himself as he endured on his own two feet.

“Ah, ’tis why you wake up in the middle of the night, making foolish noises because your leg cramped. How absurd.”

“...I can’t even say you’re wrong, and I could really use a dip in the Nyohhira springs right about now. Worst of all, I still haven’t been able to exchange the money yet.”

“Hmm? But did you not say that all the small coins were in the Church’s donation box or whatnot?”

“Right, but everyone else knows that, too. If a whole crowd of people shows up asking for the same thing, then there won’t be any left for outsiders.”

Going to the money changers was technically an option, but it was plain to see that they would ask for an unbelievable fee. The money changers themselves were very likely procuring coins from the Church at a terrible rate to begin with.

“And so you come home ignominiously; ’twould seem the day I address you as *honored husband* is far off yet.”

“As if you ever intended on calling me anything of the sort. Besides, if you suddenly acted so meek after all this time, it would leave a weird taste in my mouth.”

Holo bared her teeth and cackled. She was in a good mood now that the alcohol was circulating through her system.

“Well, even though I didn’t receive any change, I did get something that might lead to an opportunity for just that.”

“Oh?”

Lawrence produced a piece of paper from his breast pocket and unfolded it on the table. It was a map of the region.

“There are only so many places that collect change, and everyone knows where they are, so it’s getting competitive. What should we do, then?”

“Easy. We simply make our way to a place no one knows about.”

“Exactly.”

Lawrence turned his skewer toward Holo with a few pieces of mutton still on it, and she leaned over the table to help herself.

“*Om, nom...* But is there a place so convenient?”

“There aren’t many, but they do exist. We’ll need a connection in order to gain access, and I have just the thing.”

Holo ignored Lawrence's proud declaration and simply munched on her bread as she gazed at the map.

Lawrence was used to Holo's spiteful and harsh attitude, so he continued without dejection.

"Remember that great, elderly merchant who helped us in that whole fuss not too long ago?"

"Aye. He was rather well-dressed, an impressive male wholly unlike a certain traveling merchant."

"...*Ahem*. Anyway, he apparently used to command a trade vessel for a powerful merchants' association and once went by the title of admiral. This man used his influence to introduce us and then sent along a request that came from the bishop."

"Oh?"

Lawrence placed his finger on Atiph, the town they were in presently, then dragged his finger down and to the right.

There was a great plain, an area often referred to as a breadbasket.

He placed his finger at the foot of the mountains that separated the grasslands and the seaside regions.

"Southeast from here, there's a large town that connects the inner continent with the coast. The people who live there thrive on the trade of quality grain."

"Oh, how pleasant. Well, there is no doubt that my wheat is the best of them all."

Holo flicked the pouch that hung around her neck and sniffed with pride.

Noting how drunk she was already and worried about what was still to come, Lawrence pressed on with his explanation.

"Since merchants who engage in the grain trade swarm the city at this time of year, they've opened a grand market."

"Oh ho, even better!"

Holo beamed with joy, and Lawrence returned the smile, then moved his

finger slightly down and to the left from the large town marked on the map.

“However, the place we’re going to is here, southwest from the town hosting the fair. A small bishopric just off a mountain highway that doesn’t see much use.”

The light from Holo’s expression suddenly vanished, as though she had been doused with ash.

As he elaborated, Lawrence kept his mouth from twisting into a smile at the sight of her reaction.

“This bishopric has deep ties with the cathedral here, almost like sister churches, but the locals have a problem. They’re having trouble with trade and permits, and even though they want to get a merchant’s help for this, most merchants are wholly preoccupied with their own trade this time of year. They’ve requested a merchant they can not only trust but one who’s also capable, so I was a convenient choice.”

He glanced at Holo just as he said that, and it seemed as though her intoxication was beginning in earnest as her eyelids struggled to stay up. She was staring at nothing in particular, silently munching on her fried fish with a flushed face. With a sigh, Lawrence removed the wooden cask from the table and set it by his feet.

“If you want to enjoy the bustling grand market...” Holo’s wolf ears under her hood perked up in response, the faintest bit of sobriety returning to her eyes as he continued. “...then we need to get the problem at the bishopric squared away quickly. Once the market’s business days are over, the other merchants might start poking their noses in this matter.”

Holo, who had been studying the map, slowly closed her eyes, then gave a big nod.

“I suppose we will need to hurry...”

“It really helps that you understand. Well then, there’s no problem with the painting, so you don’t mind if we head off right away, yeah?”

Holo turned to look at Lawrence, her red eyes misty from the alcohol.

The reason she looked irritated—like when things were not exactly aligned—was because she was weighing the bustle of a grand market she had not yet seen against staying in this town to fuss over the painting and eat fried fish to her heart's content.

“Well?” he asked, and Holo nodded with a sigh, then let out a loud sneeze.

The day after Holo had passed out drunk and Lawrence carried her back to the inn, they were already on the road. Despite how long it had been since their serious traveling days, they still always made sure they were ready to leave at a moment's notice.

“Agh...Fresh fish from the sea was surprisingly delectable...Perhaps we should have stayed in town for a bit longer.”

For a day to begin travel, the weather was unpleasant. A cold wind blew in from the west.

Holo sat snuggled up against the cargo in the cart bed, a woolen shawl draped over her shoulders. She muttered to herself as she wrote in her diary as usual.

“The town with the grand market is at the base of the mountains that divide the region's breadbasket from the coastline. Whether it's from the plains and the mountains, the north and the south, or the east and the west, all sorts of things gather here, and that's why they have fruits as good as what you can find in the mountains.”

When Lawrence said this while driving their carriage forward, Holo's ears flicked underneath her hood.

“Of course, there's plenty of liquor made from those choice fruits, and since it is the center of the grain trade, there are plenty of bakers. The place is sure to be packed with all sorts of pastries that use tons of fruit.”

There was a scraping sound, almost like a broom, which was likely Holo's tail swishing in anticipation and excitement.

Lawrence laughed silently when there came a sudden smack at the back of his head.

“Ow! Hey, what was that for?”

“You fool! ’Tis because you try to entice me with food!”

“That’s not why I said all that. It’s because we’re going to be leading a dull life on the road for a little while. You can endure it if you have a prize to look forward to at the end, right?”

“You might insist we be frugal even after enduring so much!”

He was about to say, *Have you ever actually been frugal just because of that, though?* but she had worked hard back in Atiph and had earned her pay.

Even Lawrence, who never forgot his roots as a merchant, had no intention of saying aloud what he might have a long time ago.

“I’ve made sure to calculate all the money you earned from working. Plus my winnings from speculating on the herring eggs. I won’t ask you to scrimp when we’ve got so much. You should be able to enjoy quite a bit of luxury this time.”

“Hmph,” Holo huffed, then leaped nimbly onto the driver’s perch.

Since it had not been long since they left Atiph, there were plenty of travelers on the road.

Though they were still vigilant about not letting people catch a glimpse of Holo’s ears and tail, since it was a cold, cloudy day that made it seem as though winter had come earlier than usual, piles of wools and furs were a common sight. Peeking out from underneath her coat, Holo’s tail simply seemed like an eccentric item she used to keep herself warm.

Holo, sitting next to Lawrence, kept rustling around, readjusting the lay of the wools beneath her and on her shoulders, like a pet dog denning in preparation for a nap until she was satisfied. Lawrence gazed at her, amused by how dedicated she was to her personal comfort, and when she finally lay her vaunted tail on her lap, Holo said, “Perhaps I should make some more money by renting out my tail while I’m at it, no?”

Her tail was quite soft and fluffy. She constantly combed it and applied scented oil on a daily basis. And because it was suffused with her body heat, it was the warmest thing on cold days like this. Whether or not she would put it under the lap blanket made a huge difference in the comfort of a journey.

“You’re so greedy...”

Lawrence sighed when she cackled, then used the reins to urge the horse forward.

“Well, even if you don’t, I might need your cooperation for this upcoming job. If you help out, I’ll be sure to thank you.”

“Oh?”

Perhaps growing tired of the playful ribbing of their earlier exchange, Holo gave her tail one last brush before placing it under their shared lap blanket.

“And what sort of business is it? I drank just a little too much yesterday.”

Lawrence mouthed silently to himself, *I’d use different words to describe last night...*, but then responded without mentioning how he had to take care of her when she passed out.

“The cause is the same as Atiph—the commotion that Col and Myuri are stirring up.”

Holo looked back at Atiph, which was just about to vanish from view in the distance, then turned back to Lawrence.

“Every church and abbey has indulged in accumulating wealth for a long time. The original purpose wasn’t to feed a love for money but to pursue a nobler idea of being able to perform charitable acts with the riches with which they were entrusted. In the end, though, it was mostly a corrupt practice. On top of that, since they naturally came to value those who excelled in trade, people who could put merchants to shame started throwing their weight about, which only made the problem worse.”

Holo nodded, yawned loudly, then rubbed her watering eyes against Lawrence’s shoulder. Despite how by all appearances it seemed like she had no interest in hearing any more, Lawrence could tell by the movement of her ears underneath her hood that she was paying attention, so he continued.

“And since the exacerbation of those problems over time caused the current cries for reform, the Church is apparently reassigning important clergy in order to avoid the people’s dissatisfaction, especially in more radical areas. But that

again is causing new problems.”

“Mm. I can see the picture now. ’Tis all well they have changed who manages where, but I suppose that means they’ve not thought of what comes after.”

Holo’s eyes then started wandering restlessly, perhaps because she was searching for jerky or something.

She seemed to quickly deduce that it was in the cart behind her and pouted.

“Exactly. And in order to show the people of the area the results of their reform, they’re choosing replacements who are especially zealous, so the problems are only multiplying.”

“Little Col is smart, but I doubt he is much suited for trade. Those boys in the town we were just in wanted to be more like him by involving themselves in the trade in a town they knew not much of, did they not?”

They had a feeling that the young priest in Atiph who wanted to crack down on things in the name of God’s teachings had even mimicked the way Col spoke.

Wondering how much attention Col and Myuri had been gathering throughout the world, Holo and Lawrence had attempted to collect stories of their activities, but every retelling they heard was jaw-dropping, making it virtually impossible to sift fact from fiction. It was likely that most of it was exaggeration. With the peace ushered in by the end of the war between the pagans and the Church, recent events were the perfect fodder for people who were starved for gossip and tall tales.

Though Myuri loved to stand out, Col was probably exhausted by everything going on.

Lawrence shrugged his shoulders, and Holo yawned loudly again.

Generally, Holo was always either eating or sleeping.

“*Yaaawn...* However, I do not see what you will need to borrow my powers for in such a matter.”

“Well, I’m also hoping things won’t come to that,” he responded, and she slipped the tail out from under their lap blanket.

“Hey, that’s not what I meant. It’s not because I don’t want to reward you.”

Holo shot him a doubtful look as she reluctantly put her tail back inside.

“Sheesh...I’d appreciate it if you stopped holding your tail hostage.”

“You want so badly to be henpecked, do you?”

Holo stifled her laughter, and Lawrence heaved a tired sigh. She had drunk, ate, and slept her fill the day before, so it seemed like she had an overabundance of playful energy.

“Anyway, this newly appointed priest’s worries cropped up when he checked the permits to see what sort of assets his new post possessed, and he discovered that there’s a shocking plot of land in his territory.”

“And that would be?”

As Lawrence turned toward the centuries-old wolf avatar who sat next to him, he said, “A cursed mountain rumored to house a fallen angel.”



The Vallan Bishopric was named in the letter.

It was located in a lonely area that was barely populated, but since a pass—though it was more accurately described as a rough trail mostly used by the wildlife—connected it with the grand market on the other side of the mountains, they had just managed to scrape by.

But then one day, an enormously wealthy merchant passing through the area stayed at a woeful inn run by a farmer and died in his room. This merchant was frugality itself and had decided to reach the great fair by taking a very unmaintained path all so he did not have to pay tariffs while on the road. However, on his deathbed, he felt remorse for how stingy he had been in life and left all his assets to the farmer who cared for him. His only parting wish was for a church to be built there.

The farmer might have quietly squirreled away the money if it had just been a few gold coins left over in the merchant’s purse, but he had inherited a vast sum, enough to build a castle.

The farmer understood this as a task given to him by God, so he fervently acted on the man’s final wishes by summoning the local clergy, erecting the

church, improving the road, and obtaining all the lands and permits they possibly could to safeguard the endowment.

Now, either because the farmer had good eyes because he worked the land day in and day out or perhaps because of some divine intervention, it became clear that rock salt and metals could be procured from the recently secured lands. This tiny church just off the road had made a huge profit and was immediately declared an independent diocese and bestowed with a cathedral.

Vallan was the name of that mythical farmer from around two hundred years ago.

“I made a mistake in my choice of husband.”

It was the fourth day on the road since leaving Atiph. That was what Holo had said as she wrote down in her diary what they had learned about the Vallan Bishopric at the inn the night before.

“Really now? By the way, Vallan abstained from meat and alcohol and worked all day from before sunup to after midnight. I hear he even made his wife and kids lead the same kind of life.”

Lawrence glanced at Holo; she had once again helped herself to plenty of drink at the inn the previous night.

Holo, gripping the quill between her middle and ring fingers and a pork sausage between her thumb and index finger, looked back and forth between Lawrence and the meaty treat, then smiled.

“I love you.”

“Only if I keep plying you with meat and alcohol, you mean,” Lawrence said, drained, and Holo bumped his shoulder with a gleeful smile. “Well, even if the story is a trifle exaggerated, that’s how the bishopric got so big. For generations, they always strived to make lots of money, but those efforts only went well for about a hundred years or so.”

“Did their source of wealth dry up?”

“First, their salt mines were abandoned because of a groundwater flood. If you go down the mine shaft now, it’s apparently just a salty subterranean lake.”

“‘Twould be perfect for salting food, though.”

“That’s true,” Lawrence said with a small smile and recalled the rest of what the innkeeper had told them. “Thus, the bishopric, needing to provide for the swelling population at the time, had to pour all its energy into the metal trade.”

Holo’s face clouded over as she wrote the story down in her diary; as a wolf who lived in the forest, she had always hated the mines that destroyed the wood.

“And in time, that dried up as well?”

And the evil was destroyed? was what Holo was asking, and Lawrence nodded vaguely.

“What ran out first wasn’t the metal but the forest.”

“ ... ”

Holo looked like a princess whose favorite knight lost a jousting match, and her gaze dropped back to her diary.

“Until then, they’d apparently dig out the ore, then refine it and make crafts from the ingots on the spot. Since they didn’t have regulations like you’d find from a guild in a regular town, a lot of artisans were attracted to these unrestricted workshops and gathered there. The place flourished.”

Holo huffed in discontent, moving the quill with rough strokes.

“But metallurgy requires a massive amount of fuel. Mines already need heaps of lumber for the gallery support beams and waterwheels for drainage. When you get a lot of people who work there together, you need firewood for cooking and material to make houses.”

“And so after felling all the nearby trees, they discovered the land does not easily recover from the mine’s poison.”

Holo pursed her lips as if to add, “‘Twas their own fault.”

“That was how the wildly booming mining town collapsed just as fast as it grew. That happened probably about seventy, eighty years ago.”

“Hmm.”

To Holo, it happened just the other day, but from Lawrence's perspective, this was a story from before he was born.

"Once the timber ran out and the people's livelihoods couldn't be supported anymore, the mines themselves closed down, and the production rate plummeted. And since the metal couldn't be refined without firewood, they were forced to ferry the heavy ores themselves to far-off towns. Profits dipped, of course, which only further encouraged people to leave, and the land became a ghost town before long."

"And the mountain is still nude, yes?" Holo asked, vexed.

"No, that's not how things turned out, apparently."

"Hmm?"

Surprised, Holo looked up.

"That means you don't remember at all, do you? Even though you kept insisting, *I am not drunk!*"

Holo was supposed to be a proud wolf, but she wore an entirely indifferent expression. It did not seem like she had any recollection of how drunk she had been.

That said, Lawrence understood why Holo never reflected on her heavy drinking. That was because Holo understood him far too well—he did, in a way, enjoy taking care of her when she was like that.

Lawrence sighed, lamenting how unfortunate that was, and continued.

"All that was left behind were exhausted mines, those forced to stay after exhausting their fortunes, and a mountain stripped bare. What appeared then was a troupe of alchemists."

Holo, who had been looking away in a huff like a cheeky little girl, turned back toward Lawrence with serious eyes.

"That forbidden text about mining techniques that we were chasing all that time ago was also written by an alchemist, remember?"

The question of whether or not the world had been created by God aside, it had always been the alchemists who cut open the forests in which the ancient

spirits like Holo had run rampant, developing techniques to put them under humanity's control.

In that sense, the name of an alchemist was something even more detestable than a shepherd to Holo.

"But, well, this is where things started to get weird," Lawrence said, pilfering a piece of sausage that sat on a wooden plate beside Holo and bringing it to his mouth. "Instead of using technology to pull metal out of the mines, they used magic for refinement."

"Magic?"

Holo herself was like a fairy tale come to life; when she had once been asked if she had seen a witch in a deep-black forest, she replied bluntly that those who ate strange mushrooms to dream had likely seen her.

But if what the innkeeper had told Lawrence was true, then he could say those alchemists were genuine sorcerers.

"They apparently managed to refine metal without using wood."

Holo had not lived hundreds of years for show, and she had visited many towns on her travels with Lawrence. She was naturally intelligent, and she rarely forgot—unless it was convenient for her—anything she saw or heard. Before she considered the possibility of magic, she proposed another explanation.

"Was it not that smelly peat?"

"Peat can burn, but its flame really isn't strong enough. And it isn't like they harvested coal from the area. It wasn't bitumen, either."

Bitumen was a black liquid known as flammable water. It was expensive, and Lawrence more often saw it used to preserve the integrity of ships and structures rather than as a fuel.

"The alchemists apparently created magic for purifying metal without fire, then used it on the meager amounts of ore that was produced by the mines and saved those who had been left behind from a dismal fate. If they could refine metal without using firewood, then they'd make so much money it would keep

a smile on their faces for the rest of their lives, you see. Not only that, but creating fire out of nothing meant that it would help bring back the foliage to the bald mountain.”

“Mm.” Holo displayed great interest in that last sentence and asked, “And did life return to the mountain?”

“It did.”

“Oh ho.”

This sight was what most would call a *blooming smile*. Lawrence found himself happy to see her beaming like that, but Holo herself understood that this was not all there was to the story.

“Still, if they simply lived happily ever after, you would not have said you might need my power, no?”

“Indeed. And they wouldn’t call it a cursed mountain, either.”

Holo brought her shapely eyebrows together, creating deep wrinkles between them. Her gaze swam, possibly because she could not find the single thread that tied the whole story together.

“Has someone like little Col deemed fireless refinement as sorcery?”

Shocking people’s common sense ran the risk of being accused of doing the devil’s work and committing blasphemy.

“I considered that, too, and the bishop from Atiph who asked me to take this on seemed to have the same idea. That the ones who visited the mountain weren’t alchemists but fallen angels who were there to lead people astray.”

“Then is that to say there is a creature with wings, a goat’s head, and a horse’s legs roaming about the mountain?”

Here was the avatar of an enormous wolf who lived in wheat talking about the stories of the devil told by the Church. All the nonhumans that Lawrence knew of were embodiments of far more commonplace animals.

“I don’t think so. But they say they still appear in the mountain.”

“What do you mean?”

Lawrence recalled watching the mouth of the innkeeper by the light of the candle, despite how Holo had ended up passing out drunk beside him.

The words that came out of the slim gap between the man's scruffy mustache and beard were thus:

"There is something that stubbornly bars anyone from entering the mountain. The technique for refining metal without heat still slumbers there to this day. Any who acquired knowledge of the technique would most certainly be able to secure immense wealth, so many in the past have attempted to investigate..."

"But they all fail to return?"

"Not only that, but you can apparently hear the clang, clang of tools on stone and ghosts appearing night after night to work a mine that should have been long since dried up."

It was a common tale, but Lawrence knew things that others did not.

For example, there was a massive wolf who occasionally wandered the steamy baths of the Nyohhira hot springs.

It was possible for things that went beyond human comprehension to exist.

"Ghosts aside, if I were to say there are reports of something on the mountain, you'd understand what I mean, right?"

Holo's ears and nose were those of a wolf. If she put her mind to it, she could locate whatever this mystery being was in an instant, even on the biggest of mountains.

"That may be true..." However, Holo spoke evasively, placing her feet on the seat of the cart and drawing her knees up. "If you should learn that something truly is there, then what are you going to do?"

Her eyes were uneasy. *She can't possibly be afraid of ghosts, can she?* Lawrence thought, but then immediately found himself annoyed with his own cluelessness. Whatever lived in that mountain surely lived in the same world as Holo. In that case, there was no doubt that whatever it was had their own reasons for being there.

For example, perhaps out of thanks to the alchemists who brought the forest

back to life, they continued to heroically protect what they had left behind to this day.

It was hard to imagine from her typical behavior, but Holo was generally compassionate and easily hurt.

She was likely reluctant to strip off a scab of history that remained on the mountain.

“I know how uneasy you must feel, but what the bishop from the Vallan Bishopric wants is concrete information to help him decide what to do next. It’s a good sign that he’s looking for a merchant. It means he wants to base his decision on loss and profit.”

Holo stared hard at Lawrence before slowly closing her eyes.

“Does that mean your eloquence will work well here?”

“Well, I guess that depends on how much the bishop trusts me.”

Holo inhaled deeply, then grumpily sighed.

“Will we be able to tidy this up before the grand market on the other side of the mountain is over?”

“That very much depends on what’s on the mountain.”

He briefly heard a wolf’s growl coming deep from Holo’s throat, but she knew full well that was all he could say at this point.

Not long later, she huffed, lay her cheek on her raised knees, and hunched over like a pouting girl.

“I suppose this will not end happily.”

Holo tended to be negative whenever her thoughts turned to the future—either because she had spent such a long time alone in a wheat field before meeting Lawrence or because it was a fundamental part of her personality.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lawrence was a merchant who never learned his lesson and always forged ahead, brimming with confidence that he would strike gold next time.

“Even so, just by us going there, we might be able to help whatever or

whoever it is residing in that mountain. Try and imagine what would happen if someone besides us went.”

The bishop searching for a merchant absolutely meant that completely washing his hands of the property was an option. Who he might sell it to and how he would sell it off were important questions for the future of the land.

“Plus, if it’s another nonhuman you get along with, we could always have them work at the bathhouse.”

“...”

Holo turned to Lawrence with a weary look in her eyes because she knew that he spoke the truth.

“You are always an optimistic fool.”

“I wouldn’t have taken your hand and come this far if I weren’t.”

Holo stared at him with quiet, red eyes, then grinned in surrender.

“You fool.”

Lawrence shrugged, adjusted his grip on the reins, and drove the horses.

Even though they had come down from deep within the mountains to the sea, they were once again climbing the mountains, though a different land meant these were not the mountains they called home.

They were used to the steep cliffs, deep forests, and the gorges carved out by creeks that made everything more complicated in the ranges of Nyohhira. What spread out before them was more like gentle hills that went on forever.

“Tall grasses that are host to small groves of trees in patches here and there are signs of terrible scars on the land. This is what happens when the forest is cut down without care.”

The maiden grass, rustling and swaying in the wind, almost looked like a field of wheat at a glance, which was terribly sad. On his past journeys as a peddler, Lawrence had often seen similar sights in places that had been seared by the fires of war.

The road itself was wide and beaten down, and if he had to choose, he would

place it among the finer roads he had ever traveled, but it was deserted besides their cart. This route had likely been established when the rock salt and metal production were thriving, a remnant of a bygone era.

“A depressing land, one that does not bring the harvest. Perhaps it would be nice for rabbits and snakes and foxes to nest in, though.”

“Almost makes me think we should slash and burn the whole place down, then turn it all into farm fields.”

“I see no rivers. Since the mountain, the source of the water, has been so ruined in the past, I doubt one would find much even after digging new wells.”

They were starting the sixth day on their cart journey, and even though they were just running out of things to talk about, their silence was not due to exhaustion.

Holo sat on the driver’s perch, staring straight ahead, and Lawrence gently placed his hand on her head. Though she would typically shoo him away like a nuisance, she quietly drew up her shoulder to lean against him. Places whose heyday had passed imparted a particular feeling of loneliness, which made them an even more depressing sight to Holo, who always felt left behind by the inexorable flow of time.

Eventually, they spotted a mound beyond the sea of maiden grass that looked like a proper mountain. It was hard to make out in the distance since there was still a way to go, but just as they had heard from the stories, it did not look barren now.

Buildings finally started to appear here and there along the sides of the road, and though they were modest, there were some wells, and here the fields of grass had been turned into farm fields. They started to see some herds of sheep, and as they sensed other signs of life, the air around them finally grew brighter.

What they came to was a village with rows of simple houses that did not seem all that well-off, and standing staunchly in the middle was a massive stone building that towered above them, surrounded by a defensive wall.

It was the Vallan Cathedral, the place where the Vallan Bishopric found its

beginnings.

The iron gates were dignified and tall, suited for a place that once controlled a mine, only they were now left open to rust. It was likely that no one was maintaining the gates, and they could not keep opening and closing the portal at will. The cathedral grounds inside the walls were also quiet, so pigs and several goats were lazily eating the grass. The stone water channel, where guests must have once washed their feet and led their horses to drink, had long since dried out; tufts of grass grew there now.

Lawrence tied his horse to the place he thought seemed the most stable, took the letter from Atiph's bishop in hand, then headed toward the church with Holo.

"'Tis a big building."

When they stood in the entrance to the church, Holo looked up and spoke in astonishment. The annexed bell tower was also high up—they had to crane their necks as far back as they could in order to peer all the way up, bringing to mind the energy and power of a bygone era.

"But still, it doesn't seem like there's anyone around."

"Mm. Yet, it smells lived in. And there is soil from hands on that side door there."

The reason the large entrance to the sanctuary remained closed was likely the same reason the gates to the grounds remained open. The side entrance was not locked, so they opened the door and let themselves inside.

"Oh ho."

"This is amazing..."

The interior was undeniably stately, and it was obvious that considerable money had been invested into the construction; the colonnade and ceiling were connected with a web of curved lines and embellished with delicate ornaments.

Rows of glass-inset cabinets lined the walls, filled with statues of the Holy Mother and other decorations. The long chains hanging from the high ceilings were likely for lit incense during times of worship. When Holo approached to

give the incense holders a sniff, she sneezed.

“It’s been cleaned.”

“Those are wax candles in the candleholders along the walls and pillars. ’Tis quite grand.”

It was all being properly cared for, but there were still no signs of life. Lawrence and Holo walked hand in hand, the echoes of their footsteps uncomfortably loud inside the sanctuary.

They walked along a hallway where the stained-glass windows depicted a scene featuring the Holy Mother and the advent of God, when they finally came to a stop.

They stood at a crossway. Here, the floor was made of different-colored stones in the pattern of the Church’s symbol.

“Dear.” Holo pointed to a spot high up on the wall that reached the ceiling.

“...This...”

Lawrence unconsciously covered his mouth when he laid eyes on the large mural. It was not a painting of something from reality, which was currently in vogue among nobles. Depicted in an extremely simplified and exaggerated style, the people in the scene all held up hands bigger than their heads in awkward positions that made them look like puppets, their expressionless faces directed toward heaven and eyes focused on nothing in particular. Such lack of sophistication gave it an indescribable power, and he could tell at a glance what it was representing.

It was the legend surrounding the Vallan Cathedral.

The one carrying a plow was probably Vallan, the founding farmer, and the hand reaching down from between the clouds was likely God’s divine will. Vallan was thriving in the following scene, which depicted the establishment of the church town, and Lawrence could see God’s good graces overflowing from the land and the people thanking God for the development of their new home.

However, the town in the mural suddenly went into decline; the people were reaching for the heavens, perhaps praying for intervention, and the angel that

came down to them was playing a flute.

“The angel has been painted with horns.”

“Its horns are the only colorful thing here. That detail must’ve been added later. The people of later generations must’ve decided it was a fallen angel.”

The group of hooded figures, their faces obscured and hoods pulled far down over their eyes, making them almost look like pagan sorcerers, must have been the alchemists. But what came after that was odd. That sense of wrongness he had felt when collecting stories about this at the inn had been put straight into images.

The alchemists prayed at the top of the mountain, and God’s bearded face appeared at the peak, shining light filtering through the clouds from the summit all the way down to the town below in time with the angel’s wild dance.

“I’ve seen paintings in areas with long-lasting rains where the people pray for clear weather, and this looks similar.”

“...Are the people in the village smiling?”

Holo narrowed her eyes and scrunched up her face because her eyesight was not that great; she could not make out the small details of the crowd.

“No, they’re expressionless. The way they’re raising their hands makes it seem like they’re either happy or begging for dear life.”

“Hmph, it makes no difference,” she spat.

Holo had stayed in the fields of a single town for centuries to honor a very old promise. She said she occasionally had to make the wheat harvest poor in order to give them as abundant of a crop as possible in the long run. On the other hand, the villagers wished for a good yield every year and often took the varying success of the harvest as Holo’s capricious whim.

Lawrence reached out to rest his hand on Holo’s back. Holo inhaled deeply, then forcefully breathed through her nose.

“God is shining the light on those men with large metalsmithing hammers, and they’re hitting that burning clump. Must be metal. There’s horses ferrying all sorts of cargo on their backs, and those merchant-looking men are raising

their hands because...it must be an expression of happiness.”

“Next to that, the forest has returned to the mountain.”

“Yeah, but—”

Lawrence cut himself off because at the foot of the mountain, now reinvigorated with forest, the people were kneeling in prayer, clearly lamenting over something.

The expressionless, bearded face of God still sat at the peak of the mountain, while the fallen angel with those ill-shaped wings sticking out of its back stood beside him, a look in its eyes that made it hard to tell what exactly it was looking at, which was a unique characteristic for this style of painting.

But at the very least, it did not seem like they were looking at the people at the foot of the mountain.

The end of the painted chronicle that continued down the hall came with the words *O Merciful God*.

“What’s with the bearded face?”

Despite how ridiculous it was, the face occupied a prominent place in the picture ever since the opening scene, making it even more eerie than it already was.

“Perhaps it means there is a weird one like that here.”

“Why is it just his face?”

Everyone else, even the smallest figures, had proper bodies.

He wondered if there was a reason that it was only his face.

“Hmm...If it were nonhuman, then...” Holo mulled over her thoughts, then lifted her face in realization. “Oh, we ate it in the last town. Would that not be it?”

“Huh?”

They had eaten plenty of specialty seafood in Atiph, along with the staples like mutton, pork, and chicken.

However, as Lawrence thought about how it looked like none of those, Holo

asked, "Is it not a crab?"

"Crab?!"

Lawrence's eyes widened, turning away from Holo's proud look back to the picture. Sure, if a face appeared in a crab shell, it might look something like that. It was also possible to see the tousled wisps of beard that extended to either side as caricatures of a crab's legs, which could explain why there was no body.

In fact, he could imagine a crab snatching people who trespassed in the mountain with those claws and biting into them with a blank, impassive face.

Lawrence shivered at how unearthly the thought was, then shook his head.

"No, no..."

He told himself to be rational about this.

What did an avatar of a crab at the mountain peak have to do with refining metal?

Furthermore, he still had no idea why it shone light from the summit.

Suddenly, they heard a voice come from above them.

"That is an interesting theory."

It was so sudden that Lawrence jumped in spite of himself, looking hurriedly up at the ceiling but finding no one there.

Even Holo with her wolf ears did not seem to know where the voice came from as she peered up at the rafters in bewilderment, her eyes darting back and forth.

Yet, even if one fooled her ears, it seemed one could not fool her wolf's nose.

"Behind the far pillar."

Holo tugged on his sleeve and whirled around. She pointed to the pillar at the far end of the hallway.

Lawrence placed his hand on his dagger, then immediately remembered that this was a cathedral.

A normal train of thought would suggest the speaker was a member of the church. His mind had gotten all jumbled after their conversation about creepy crabs. Lawrence took a deep breath to steady himself, then spoke.

“We are travelers! We received orders from the bishop in Atiph and came here!”

His voice echoed around the high-ceilinged stone structure; it almost sounded like a choir singing a canon.

“We have a letter of introduction from the bishop in Atiph. We were hoping to have an audience with the bishop here.”

Lawrence’s voice echoed around them a few more times before disappearing at the end of the hallway. The voice must have sounded like it was coming from above them because of the strange acoustics.

Whoever it was behind the pillar did not answer.

Or perhaps it was someone they needed to deal with using Holo’s power?

They were in a cathedral with eerie pictures on the walls—a place where past prosperity still lived.

He thought that it could be entirely possible there was something roaming here that was beyond human comprehension.

“It seems like this is truly a coincidence.”

They heard the calm voice of a woman. What surprised him was not that it sounded like it was coming from right next to them or that it seemed a mix of annoyed and delighted.

Lawrence clearly remembered this voice.

“Dear.” Holo turned around to look at Lawrence, a sullen look on her face. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Right after she made that comment, their greeter casually revealed themselves from behind the pillar.

The movement almost seemed like a delicate dance because whomever it was had impeccable posture.

And just as he had imagined, Lawrence knew this person very well. She was a lot more mature than how he remembered her, but if he were to count the years and months since they last saw each other, it made perfect sense.

“We can simply never comprehend the whims of God.”

Walking their way was a lone woman. Her hair was neatly pulled back into a bun, her eyes were the color of honey, and though she seemed rather slender, her back was stretched powerfully straight, full of dignity in the way she carried herself. He could tell from the color dyed into the collar of her clerical robes that she occupied the position of a priest. She was the spitting image of what most people saw when they pictured the clergy.

“It has been quite a while, Mr. Lawrence,” the woman said with a smile, and her gaze turned to the person beside him. “And for better or worse, you seem the same as always. You reek of alcohol.”

“Fool,” Holo retorted, folding her arms in front of her chest and turning away in a huff.

A wry smile started to cross Lawrence’s face as he thought, *These two never got along...*, but he quickly corrected himself.

It was Holo alone who found their interactions unbearable.

After all, Col had described this woman as a believer of stringent faith and the one who temporarily acted as his teacher so that he might master theology. Holo, on the other hand, would drink all the alcohol in the world if she could and always picked the bits of meat that dripped with grease, so it was only natural they had poor compatibility.

“I never thought we would see you in a place like this,” Lawrence responded and said her name. “It’s been a long time, Miss Elsa.”

“All is as God wills it.”

Elsa, who they met long ago on their merchant travels and who had guided them at an important crossroads, smiled and nodded.

Lawrence and Elsa approached each other and exchanged a handshake and a brief hug.

Just after Lawrence and Holo met over ten years ago, back when Holo had forgotten the way back to Yoitsu, they met Elsa while pursuing research on her homeland. She was also very important to them as the person who presided over their ceremony when he and Holo got married.

“I received your letter, which had indeed read, ‘*See you again soon,*’ but I hadn’t thought you would appear *quite* this quickly.”

“It seems the horse got the letter to you safe and sound.”

One of the many nonhumans who had come to the bathhouse in Nyohhira was someone who delivered letters to faraway lands for a living. The person in question was the embodiment of a horse, which was most suitable for the role.

“At any rate, is it true that you’ve just had a baby, Miss Elsa?”

“That was two years ago; my third one. The older kids are taking care of the baby for me. My *biggest and eldest child* needs to start living life without me having to scold him all the time.”

Elsa’s husband was a good-natured young man named Evan who was her complete opposite—a bighearted man who did not dither over the details. *He is clearly the henpecked type*, Lawrence thought and considered himself much the same.

Right as Lawrence and Elsa were renewing their friendship, Holo interjected, annoyed.

“More importantly, we are rather tired from our long journey. I believe it is one of your Church’s principles to care for travelers, no?”



Elsa stared blankly at Holo before responding to her caustic remark with a gleeful smile. It was almost as though she had grown used to the whining of children.

“Indeed. We just so happen to be all out of visitors or helpers at the moment, so we have plenty of rooms open.”

“I wish to wash the dust away with hot water. Will there be a hot bath waiting for me?”

Holo had grown so used to life in Nyohhira with the hot springs. Back in Atiph, she had often cried about wanting to fill a tub full of hot water to submerge herself completely.

“Yes, of course.”

“What?!”

Holo’s eyes sparkled, and Elsa continued with a clear expression.

“If you draw the water, split the firewood, and start the fire yourself, that is.”

“...”

Elsa, with her honey-colored eyes and straight posture, said, “We brook no idleness here. A day filled with hard work is a good day.”

Back when Lawrence was still a merchant, Elsa was a shining example of what every earnest priestess strove to be. It was Elsa who taught Col proper manners, back when he was still a child who accompanied them on their travels.

In those days, Elsa had often scolded Holo, whose manners were no better or worse than her own daughter, Myuri.

“Mr. Lawrence, did you put your horse out front?”

“Yes.”

“Once you’ve unpacked, I’ll provide you with water to wash your feet and a meal. There’s no need to worry. It won’t be roasted beans and grass from the yard.”

She added that last bit while shooting Holo a mischievous look.

When Holo looked away in a huff, Lawrence felt like he might forget which one was supposed to be the wisewolf who would live for many centuries.

Larger Church institutions had plenty of courtesy calls from nobles and traveling clergy, so they always had lodging facilities. Lawrence and Holo borrowed one of those rooms, unpacked their things, then went outside.

Elsa was by the vegetable garden that sat within the church grounds, her sleeves rolled up as she drew water from the well.

“You will feel refreshed once you wash your feet.”

There were several stories of saints who washed the feet of the poor, but of course Holo was not the type to feel any gratitude for this.

Holo stood there with an obvious glower, and Elsa turned to look at Lawrence.

“I am happy to see you two so close, but are you perhaps spoiling your partner a little too much?”

Elsa scolded him, and he had no choice but to offer a humble apology.

“See, Holo—cold water feels good, too.”

Lawrence washed his hands in the tub filled to the brim with water. With a grumpy look, Holo sat down nearby on a massive rock and stuck her feet out at Lawrence.

With Elsa’s exasperated sigh stinging his ears, Lawrence removed the princess’s shoes, rolled up the edges of the trousers she wore under her robe, and began washing her feet. All her complaints notwithstanding, she seemed to enjoy it. Even though her expression remained grumpy, her tail swayed gently back and forth.

“Still, are you managing this place alone, Miss Elsa?”

Since Elsa made her way toward the woodpile, saying that she would need to get a fire going in order to start preparing their meal, Lawrence took on the duty of splitting firewood for her. Holo did not complain about anything in particular, perhaps because she was satisfied after Lawrence had washed her feet, and followed along without raising much fuss.

“You know about the grand market on the other side of the mountain, yes? All the people who normally maintain the church and the village are staying there until it’s over. We need to sell the village’s harvest as dearly as we can and purchase all the goods we need to get through winter as cheaply as possible, after all. Since I don’t know the land well nor do I have many connections, I opted to stay behind.”

Lawrence swung down the ax as he listened to Elsa talk. Holo, who seemed to enjoy the rhythmic *crack* of logs splitting, deftly collected the freshly cut timber and then quickly set up a new piece for him.

To Lawrence, she seemed just like a dog delighted to retrieve a stick he had thrown, but he of course kept that impression to himself.

“That being said, I am much more at ease when I’m alone. All my cleaning pays off here, you see.”

He could not help but smile wryly at her precise language.

When all the wood was finally cut, Elsa guided them inside to the kitchen.

“But still, I am surprised that you left Nyohhira to visit a place like this. Why on earth?” Elsa asked as she took down some tinder and flint from a shelf in the kitchen.

“It would be a very long story, but...I want to ask you the same thing. Why are you here, Miss Elsa? You’re rather far away from home.”

“I had no intentions of coming here, either. Originally, I was asked by a neighboring church to help them because they didn’t have enough people who could read, so I only came here on a temporary basis to read through the assets and permits that the church had accumulated. That was just before summer came this year.”

As Elsa detailed her arrival, she struck the flint stones together, immediately causing a spark.

When Holo saw that, she teased Lawrence with “Would you look at that!” He took offense to that—it had only been the first few days of their travels that he took a long time to get a fire started.

“And when I heard that Col was somehow involved with the Church hastily cleaning up its act, I wasn’t sure if I should be surprised or suddenly understand exactly how this situation came to be.”

Elsa selected a piece of firewood that looked like it would burn easily from among the wood Lawrence brought over and tossed it in the stove.

Lawrence was impressed with how even though it seemed like she had simply thrown it in without much care, the firewood had actually been thoughtfully stacked in a way to make it burn easier.

“That was our reason as well. Our only daughter, Myuri, ended up following Col on his journey, and we’ve had fewer letters as of late, so we left to check up on them.”

Elsa turned her honey-colored eyes to Lawrence and Holo, then smiled dryly, hinting at something deeper.

She probably thought of them as overly doting parents.

Lawrence suddenly cleared his throat before continuing. “*Ahem.* So, Miss Elsa, you were helping out in various places until you found yourself here by request, is that right?”

“That is mostly correct, but that picture you were looking up at is the biggest reason. There is a significant reason as to why our paths crossed here.”

That painting showed the history of the Vallan Bishopric’s development and decline—alchemists who brought techniques that could be called nothing else but magic and the cursed mountain that was said to still be occupied by a being shrouded in mystery.

“When I heard that the bishopric was looking for help, I hesitated because it was so far away, but when I heard the story of how the Vallan Bishopric came to be, it immediately caught my interest. I wondered if I might perhaps add a new story to my father’s collection of tales about the pagan gods.”

The reason Lawrence and Holo first visited Elsa’s village was for her father’s prodigious collection of books.

“And the outcome?”

Elsa, placing an iron pot on the stove and pouring water into it from a jug, gracefully shrugged.

“You two ended up coming. Did you get the letter in Atiph?”

“...Does that mean you’re representing the troubled bishop, Miss Elsa?”

After putting the jug away, Elsa pointed to her collar.

“I am a priest. The *assistant* in the assistant priest title is still very much a success for a woman in our organization. This is only temporary, however. It would be irresponsible for the Church to allow someone with a husband and children to become a full-fledged priest. They so lack help that someone like me had to be recruited for this.”

Despite what Elsa said, she could read and had even journeyed once to find a clergyman to whom she could entrust their village’s church. The insightful and earnest woman had always been well respected in her village; there was good reason they could rely on her.

“However, even if I went to the church in Atiph for help and gave a detailed explanation of the situation, they might be wary of me, would they not? They might interpret the arrival of a female priest from an outside village as an attempt to wrest away control. That is why in my letter asking for support, I wrote that I was only the temporary representative. I wasn’t lying.”

When Elsa, a woman who was prim, proper, and who respected the creed above all, smiled mischievously at the end of her explanation, Lawrence realized that she had grown stronger in the years since they had last met.

“What is that face supposed to mean? I’ve learned how to navigate the world a little, you know.”

As she pressured him for a reply, she added generous amounts of salt and garlic to the pot. He caught a glimpse of how efficiently she must be running the house back in her home village.

“You don’t mind stew, do you?”

“Are you putting in meat?” Holo asked, and Elsa shrugged.

“I am the one who invited you here, so I would not admonish you for eating

meat.”

“How considerate of you. What sort of meat is it?”

“You are a wolf, no? Did you see the grasses on your way here?”

By the way Elsa elegantly handled Holo, Lawrence could picture her doing the same thing with a child who persistently asked what was for dinner.

“Rabbit!”

“A rare specialty around these parts.”

Holo’s eyes glittered, her tail rustling back and forth.

Elsa smiled dryly at Holo’s voraciousness.

“With everything you’ve told us so far, it seems even more surprising that you requested the aid of a merchant,” Lawrence pointed out, while beside him Elsa requested the cheerful Holo to retrieve the rabbit meat from the villagers. Holo did not mind going through a bit of trouble for meat, and she exited the kitchen with light steps.

Despite how Holo would get hilariously jealous whenever her prey was left alone with another woman, she, of course, did not seem to question his relationship with Elsa.

“The land is referred to as the cursed mountain, and the nearby villagers dare not venture in even to collect firewood. Things would only become more complicated if I had summoned a member of the clergy. However, merchants wouldn’t mind a curse or two if it meant making money, so I thought that one might boldly stride into the forest to investigate what’s at the peak.”

Elsa’s words hinted at what she thought of merchants, but she was certainly not wrong.

“Which means you don’t know what’s in the mountain, either.”

“No. What I was originally called here for was to manage this cathedral’s assets and check their permits. I have my own veritable mountain of things to do. I also have work to do for my own village, so I want to return before winter settles in. I simply cannot go into the mountains myself. Even if I decide to set aside the time to gather information, everyone who works in this cathedral all

pursued church law in outside towns and are not locals, and I'm a bit hesitant of what others may think if I decided to gather information from the locals."

A female priest who hailed from a faraway land gathering pagan stories that have been passed down in the region for ages would certainly invite unwanted suspicion. They might think she was a new kind of inquisitor or even a foreign spy plotting to take over.

"And the book vault didn't have any records that might prove useful. The stories you can gather at inns along the way are more detailed at this point. You saw the painting in the cathedral; that is surely a sign the people at the time thought it was a story they needed to leave behind for future generations, at any rate."

"Did you look up the previous bishops?" Lawrence asked, and Elsa shrugged.

"Given it's a town that's home to a mine that has long since dried out and is associated with heretical anecdotes, pretending it doesn't exist is the correct judgment. Nothing good will come of anything if an inquisitor gets even a whiff of this place."

They were sweeping the town's existence under the rug.

"On the other hand, it is not just my curiosity. A very practical problem has reared its head. It's rather troubling that we hold lands that cannot be put to good use. One glance tells you how run down this bishopric has become, doesn't it? Selling off a mountain that barely produces any metal and using that money to dig wells and improve the roads would be immensely helpful in changing the people's lives for the better. But likely since the local people know the stories of the land, they are hesitant about such a deal. That is also where a merchant from a faraway place comes into play."

Things finally lined up with the letter of request that he got from the bishop in Atiph.

Lawrence could only sigh in admiration in response to Elsa's sensible judgment.

"Only a merchant from a faraway land could find a buyer who has never heard the rumors of a cursed mountain and knows nothing about the history of

the land, right?”

Elsa did not respond, but she smiled.

It made sense that she, an outsider, had been left alone in this massive cathedral to look after it.

Anyone could rest easy knowing that she would take care of things.

“Well, as for venturing up onto the mountain to see what’s there, you can leave that to us.”

Lawrence peered outside through the kitchen entrance and saw Holo rushing toward them, holding a rabbit tied up with hemp rope in her arms. She wore a wide, guileless smile that made him wonder why she ever bothered to call herself a wisewolf.

“As long as she gets meat and drink, you can expect good work from us.”

Elsa shrugged, adding another dash of salt to the pot.

Holo loved pairing rich food with her alcohol.

It seemed like Elsa had scored a clean point on Holo.

Once their bellies were full of rabbit stew and a bit of wine, Elsa guided Lawrence and Holo to the cathedral vault. The stone basement looked like a dungeon at first, and that impression was only emphasized by the imposing sculptures of demons placed here and there meant to ward off evil spirits.

When they reached the deepest recesses, Elsa inserted a massive metal key, which barely fit in the palm of her hand, into a heavy metal door.

As the door swung open, Holo remarked, “This reminds me of that hole where the snake was.”

There was a legend of a massive snake in the village where Elsa was from, and the church basement was connected to the cave that once housed the snake. The basement filled with rows of shelves stuffed full of parchment and books even looked similar.

“Are these all permits?”

“Only about a quarter of them. The territories are quite diverse, so about half

of the papers are resident tax lists, proof of property rights, and other minute documents. The books are mostly technical manuals. They include the processes for mining rock salt and ores, as well as known methods for refinement. They were covered in thick dust, which means no one has touched them for a long time—useless nowadays. I was thinking about selling them off.”

It smelled rather moldy in the book vault, which was probably the reason why Holo sneezed several times and brought her nose to her robe.

“This is what I wanted to show you.”

Elsa led the way, candlestick in hand.

While they were eating their rabbit stew, Elsa had told them all she had learned about the cursed mountain from her own investigations, but even despite having read all her father’s books on pagan gods, she still did not understand the mysteries behind that painting.

Additionally, rumors of dreadful monsters lurking in the mountains and forests were common throughout the world. Lawrence knew that most of them were made up, and one could even argue that they were introduced for a purpose.

For example, sometimes villagers would say there was a beast living in the nearby mountains or forests and claim that they simply could not continue venturing into the supposed monster’s stomping grounds. With such an excuse in place, they would then ask to be exempt from some taxes to make up for their losses while still profiting handsomely from those very mountains and forests. Other times, tales of monsters were simply to keep outsiders from seeking out the natural bounty of the land they tended to. It was for those reasons that people often made up these stories.

There were no records of the cursed land in the cathedral, and Elsa had wondered if the locals had spread the story in the beginning for some sort of political reasons, which was entirely possible.

However, one day, when she went into the vault to sort out the permits, she noticed something that had been stored as though whoever had placed it there was trying to keep it hidden.

“Is this it?”

Elsa removed the cloth, exposing to Lawrence and Holo a gilded bell, large enough to be categorized as massive.

“There was a record for the order of a new bell in an account book from fifty years ago. Hanging in the bell tower now is the newly casted bell from that time.”

“So this is the previous one?”

Elsa nodded, lighting another candle with her own candlestick and illuminating the bottom part of the bell.

“Look at this.”

Both Lawrence and Holo peered at it, and they both gulped.

“Are these...bite marks?”

In one spot on the massive bell, big enough for Holo to hide inside, there were four holes all in a row.

“That’s what it seems like. What do you think?”

Each individual hole was not large enough for a fist to fit inside, but two fingers could easily rest in the gaps without much trouble. And anyone who had seen Holo’s fangs had no choice but to picture just that.

“Us wolves hate gold,” Holo said and brought her face closer to the open holes in the bell. “...A scent still lingers...*Ha-choo!*”

Holo wiped her nose after she sneezed, then rubbed it again on Lawrence’s sleeve.

She must have really hated the smell.

“I would not have minded much if it were just a legend, but this bell is here, and I could not help but wonder, you know.”

Lawrence looked down at the bell and groaned. If whoever bit into this bell was still here, then he started to think that the story he heard at the inn about people going into the mountain and then never coming back might not be entirely made up.

However, he heard an exasperated sigh, then looked to see Holo sniffle.

“You fool,” she said with a nasal voice, then kicked the bell with a *dong*. “This bell hung from that tall bell tower, no? How would one of us bite into it?”

““Oh.””

Lawrence and Elsa voiced their sudden understanding at the same time, and Holo turned her head in exasperation.

“Birds do not have teeth. ’Twould even be strange for those who have talons.”

“...That’s true. There would be three of those, and marks would have shown up on the other side, too.”

“Also, these holes were not created by brute force.”

“Huh?”

No sooner than Lawrence had made a noise to clarify, Holo suddenly and forcefully gripped his side.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“If you were not so flabby, you would have been crushed when I grabbed you.”

Holo let him go, and Elsa nodded, interested.

“Indeed, the bell still holds its shape quite well.”

“If one were to bite hard enough to create holes, then the bell would have either lost its shape or the force would have left cracks throughout, but that does not seem to be the case at all. And these holes are odd.”

Holo examined the holes closely, illuminated by the candlelight, and squinted.

“How does one create holes like this?”

Lawrence peered at them again, but he did not quite understand what Holo was getting at. There were four strange openings in a row, and he could only picture a dog biting into metal leaving marks like those behind.

However, he could not ignore her point that it had been hung high in the bell

tower, and there were no signs of the warping or cracks that obviously should have been left behind if something did bite into it.

“In truth, I would assume that this bell has nothing to do with the legend...”

It was a rational inference, but Holo herself did not seem to entirely believe it.

Lawrence asked, “First of all, despite all the odd points about this and accepting the assumption that something left these bite marks”—Holo and Elsa looked at Lawrence—“do you think this is something you can deal with?”

The candlelight wavered and flickered, even though there was no wind.

Or perhaps that was because Holo gave an undaunted smile.

“I am Holo the Wisewolf. I will not go down so easily, except perhaps against the Moon-Hunting Bear.”

She was the embodiment of a massive, towering wolf who lived in wheat.

That was what helped them settle on their next move.

Once the sun set, everyone working the fields returned home, and after dinner, in order to save costs on candles, they all got ready for the next day and went to sleep.

It was precisely during this time of evening that Holo finally revealed her wolf form.

“You should wait here.”

“Fool. You lose your cool surprisingly fast. As if I’m going to let you handle this alone.”

Lawrence mimicked Holo, which earned him an annoyed swipe from her massive tail.

Lawrence’s protests seemed to only reach deaf ears as he lay flipped over on the ground, but Elsa also weighed in.

“I want to avoid any fighting as much as possible. If there really is something up there, then we do always have the option of just leaving it alone.”

“It depends on who or what it is. It would be nice if it is willing to communicate.”

Elsa nodded, helped Lawrence up onto Holo's back, then gripped her Church crest.

"May God watch over you."

"You always have quite the nerve."

The Church's God was a newcomer compared to the ancient spirits of the forest. However, Elsa, who seemed to have done this simply out of habit, blinked at Holo's comment and flashed a troubled smile.

"Listen—even if you get shaken loose, I will not be picking you up."

"I won't fall, so long as you don't pull any mischief."

Just as he said that, Holo almost deliberately shuddered, then immediately dashed off.

Lawrence turned back to see Elsa waving them off, but he quickly grabbed tightly onto Holo's fur and pressed himself down onto her. They went faster and faster, the wind whipping in his ears, drowning out the rumble of Holo's footsteps. The moon only occasionally peeked out from between the clouds, making the nighttime fields of maiden grass look like a pitch-black lake.

From Holo's back, as she dashed through the silhouetted scenery, Lawrence caught the briefest glimpse of her world for a moment.

Lawrence, who believed that they knew absolutely everything about each other, was realizing all over again that he was in love with Holo who was not human but a wolf.

Normally, it scarcely registered, but it was times like these that the difference between them struck him hard.

If he were to tell her that despite that, he was surprisingly okay with clinging to a powerful bundle of fur, Holo would surely make a face that would be a mix of embarrassment, displeasure, and hurt, with her tail meandering back and forth. As he smiled at the image, he endured the small upswelling of fear he felt.

He was not sure how long he spent like that, but after some time, the whipping wind in his ears finally abated, and he could hear the light sounds of

Holo stepping firmly on the ground.

When he looked up, he found they had, at some point, come to a copse, and he could see the moon hiding behind the clouds beyond the cluster of trees. It seemed like they had reached the foot of the mountain.

He had heard the journey would take several hours by horse, but of course, Holo had much longer and more powerful strides.

“Are you sure we’re okay barging in on its territory like this?”

If there was something in the mountain, he wondered if it would be better if they observed the area a little bit before approaching like this.

“I smell naught but the usual scent of deer.”

It was hard to tell from up on Holo’s back, but her nimble footwork carried them over small height differences and some stones without much jostling.

No matter what she said, she was never honest about making sure he was safe on her back.

“Can you tell where it was that face was painted?”

“For now, we shall make our way up to the highest peak. We might perhaps learn something from the view up there.”

“Makes sense,” Lawrence responded right as Holo sped up. Or perhaps it only seemed that way because they were going up a steeper incline now that they were traversing the mountain paths. If he tried to climb this himself, he would almost certainly just end up breaking his bones, but Holo ascended with the speed of a horse galloping across a flat plain. He could clearly tell by her steps, her breathing, and how her large tail swayed that she was enjoying the climb.

Holo’s home was not in the towns of humans.

Lawrence knew that the place she truly belonged was deep in the woods.

“We are here.”

Holo stopped at a spot that was sparsely dotted with trees. It almost looked like a plaza at first glance. Lawrence realized he must have been gripping her fur much tighter than he had thought. After easing his tense fists, he carefully slid

off Holo's back as she lay with her stomach on the ground.

There were layers upon layers of soft, fallen leaves on the ground; there was little doubt that a short dig would be all that was needed to turn over some good soil.

"It doesn't look like it used to be a bald mining mountain. This is the reason why they can get as much water from the wells as they like, huh?"

He gently kicked the leaves underfoot and scattered some acorns; once his eyes grew used to the darkness, he could see saplings sprouting here and there.

"Not so. There are stones with metal in them scattered throughout the mountain, and the terrible odor stings my nose. I am certain your eyes would notice the peculiarities if we were to come when the sun is high," Holo said as she bumped Lawrence with her big nose. It seemed as though she was doing that because she longed for a familiar smell, so he scratched the ridge of her snout with his hand and watched as her tail wagged in response.

"I'm not sure what they mean by a curse...but if there's been mining residue left behind, then maybe they're talking about the pollution? But there's still a lot of trees, and it feels too peaceful for that to be the main issue..."

Instead, the atmosphere around them felt appropriate for a ghost to suddenly appear.

"Mm."

Holo, who had been fawning over Lawrence with her nose, lifted her head, then looked around at their surroundings with sharp eyes.

"I do not know if there is still something here, but...there is no doubt that there once was."

Lawrence looked at her in surprise, and she met his gaze, as though urging him to look at the woods.

"The types of trees dotting this mountain are odd."

"They are?"

"They would not come to be like this naturally. Every tree planted here drops its leaves in the winter and bears nuts. And starting at the skirt of the mountain,

nearly every tree has been planted with neat regularity."

Nut-bearing deciduous trees made for excellent firewood and could also be used as nursery beds for mushrooms. And since they were planted with regularity, that brought Lawrence to one conclusion.

"So they've been planted. Does that mean it didn't grow back naturally on its own?"

"'Tis likely. And 'tis the same for as far as I can see. I have never laid eyes on such a sight as this."

Holo, who had spent centuries looking at and roaming through forests, could tell that there was something strange about the mountain.

"For nature to return on its own on such a wide scale would require centuries to begin with. Had the mountain not gone bare only a scant few decades ago? There is no questioning that someone has been caring for it."

"Could it be the villagers?"

Holo turned her large nose to Lawrence and huffed.

"They would need a population the size of an ant colony. And humans are intelligent. They would not do something so foolish as plant nothing but their favorite trees. 'Tis not a good thing to plant only one type of tree."

The way she said *favorite* caught Lawrence's attention.

"Do you have a hunch as to who might have planted these trees?"

"This solves one mystery in that terrible painting," Holo huffed in displeasure and turned to look at Lawrence with reproachful eyes. *"I knew I should get that painting back in the port fixed. The picture must be done properly; otherwise, the correct story will not reach future generations."*

Lawrence was astonished that she still had not given up on the painting, but he responded with a question.

"Which mystery, the face at the peak? Or?"

"The angel beside the face. 'Tis not the angels you speak of."

"But it had wings."

"It only seems so because of the awful workmanship. Those are not wings."

There was something that looked like wings attached to the back of the person who had been supporting God's face. But what if things were not what they seemed at first?

Lawrence looked at Holo, and the queen of the forest revealed the answer.

"'Tis a squirrel. The squirrel's tail goes up its back, making it seem like wings."

At that moment, Lawrence realized what it was about the woods that had felt slightly strange. Then he understood why so many trees had grown in such a short period of time and why they were all the type that produced nuts.

"Digging holes to bury tree nuts is their specialty. They can stuff a handful of nuts into their mouth and carry them around as well. That surely sped up their work. Either way, there is no questioning that this forest was created by a squirrel."

Part of the puzzle, which had been full of mysteries, had been somewhat illuminated now.

However, he still had a question.

"If it really is a squirrel, then those bite marks on the bell are still a puzzle. Or wait, is it possible that its claws left those marks?"

"A squirrel trying to crush a bell in a display of its own strength? If those tiny squirrel paws are responsible for those holes, then...it would certainly have to be a squirrel the size of a mountain."

It was hard to imagine, and in that case at any rate, he still couldn't conceive of a reason why the bell kept its shape and why there were no telltale cracks.

"The quickest way to learn more is to ask the squirrel itself...Can you tell if it's here on the mountain?"

"My nose does not work so well, likely because I can smell metal here and there. Well, it has created a place full of delicious treats, so it must be hiding somewhere. If it was okay for me to howl, I could send a message asking it to come out all the way to the other side of the mountain."

There were regular villages covering the area just beyond the foot of the

mountain. While there were few fields, perhaps due to poor access to water in the region, there was plenty of grass, so the locals raised sheep and goats. If they heard a wolf howling, it would certainly mean trouble for their livelihoods.

“We’ll leave that as our last option.”

“Then we have no choice but to conduct our own search. Well, I am sure the squirrel will notice if we spend the night here.”

What would happen if a massive wolf suddenly appeared one day in what was supposed to be a self-made paradise full of treats?

Most any squirrel would certainly come to at least ask its business.

“We’re sleeping outside, then? But I haven’t brought anything...Gah!”

As Lawrence was talking, Holo’s tail wrapped around him and flipped him over, but her soft fur caught him on his back.

“Are you not satisfied with sleeping in my fur?”

Big Holo turned to him with red eyes and fangs.

Lawrence could tell what sort of mood Holo was in at a glance, but to the average onlooker, he probably looked like a poor traveler who was about to be eaten.

“Oh yeah, we spent a night like this right when we first met Miss Elsa, didn’t we?”

That was the time they had suddenly found themselves involved in a fight that stemmed from a feud between Elsa’s village and a nearby town, so they slept outside in the woods after a hasty escape.

Lawrence stroked the fur of her tail, reminiscing, when she swatted him with that same tail.

“You have quite the nerve to speak of other females whilst you lay in my fur.”

He lay on Holo’s side, and he could hear a growl like rolling thunder coming from beneath him.

“It might get a little cold tonight, so I figured it might be better to make it a little warmer.”

“You fool.”

Holo curled up and bumped Lawrence with her nose.

Then, seemingly satisfied with teasing him for the moment, she huffed, stretched her limbs as though she had been lounging, and flicked her ears.

“It has been quite a while.”

Holo seemed extremely happy.

In Nyohhira, Holo would occasionally find jobs to do, then wander the mountains in her wolf form, but Lawrence rarely ever went with her. There were also many guests in Nyohhira, and a few sometimes went out into the mountain during their stay, so chances to change into her wolf form were few and far between.

As Holo happily cradled him in her bosom, Lawrence could not help but say, “I thought you hated when we did this.”

Humans were humans. Wolves were wolves.

Lawrence and Holo had always avoided having such an obvious truth thrust in their faces.

Holo started to lift her head when he spoke, but she reconsidered mid-movement, then relaxed once more as she rested her chin on the blanket of fallen leaves.

“It depends on my mood.”

Her slitted red eyes were likely twinkling in playful self-deprecation. Indeed, whenever she was in a bad mood—even in Nyohhira—she would return to her wolf form and go for a soak in the springs.

“Whims are Your Majesty’s special privileges,” he said, stroking her fur, and her tail shivered in delight.

“You truly are a fool,” Holo said with a rumbling sigh as she closed her eyes.

Lawrence flashed a small smile, relaxed, and let himself sink into her.

Drowsiness set upon him immediately as he lay among the warm fur that smelled of the woods.

Holo's idea—sleeping in the mountain and having whatever it was notice them—turned out to be the correct choice. When dawn broke, Lawrence had Holo guide him to a stream that did not smell metallic and built a fire next to it. Right as he was roasting a wild rabbit, Holo noticed something.

Holo had been keenly watching the rabbit roast, her large tail thumping up and down, when she suddenly lifted her head. Before Lawrence could say anything, she dashed off. The way she moved was completely different from when she had brought him to the peak. Like in a gust of wind, the fallen leaves whirled into the air, and she vanished from sight in an instant—quick wit and a reaction fit for a master hunter of the forest.

Lawrence was dumbfounded, but he reminded himself that Holo would never get lost in the mountains, much less miss a place where meat was being cooked. He turned his attention back to the roasting meat, and just as he was about to help himself to an early bite of a thigh dripping with fat, he thought he spotted Holo's ears poke up from the cliffside beside the stream. A moment later, her whole body emerged.

“Oh, welcome...back?”

Holo carried an enormous squirrel in her mouth, the likes of which he had never seen.

“It came to take a look at us.”

She had been carrying the squirrel by the scruff of its neck, and even when she let it go, it stayed curled up in a ball.

Its characteristic body-size tail was shivering, and it was hunched over, cradling its head.

This squirrel would certainly surpass Lawrence in height if it stood up straight, but right now it only looked like a perfectly round ball of fur.

“Does it understand words?”

“Come now.”

Holo poked it with her nose and the squirrel's head snapped up, and the moment its eyes met with Lawrence's, he understood. He could tell right away

that there was intelligence in its eyes.

“We did not come here to bring ruin to this forest,” he said, and the squirrel’s mouth—much too small for the size of its body—moved but produced no words. “And of course, that wolf there isn’t going to take your life.”

The squirrel closed its mouth and glanced back at Holo.

“That depends.”

Then, when Holo flashed a fang-filled grin, it immediately curled up again.

“Hey,” Lawrence warned her, and she huffed before sitting behind Lawrence with the squirrel on the opposite side.

At last, the squirrel lifted its head slightly and looked at Lawrence.

“Are you...human?”

What it really wanted to ask was why he was working with a wolf.

“I used to be a merchant, but I’m now a bathhouse owner—my name is Kraft Lawrence.” He introduced himself and extended a hand. The squirrel’s adorably round eyes flicked back and forth between Lawrence’s face and his hand several times before it timidly reached out in return. Though its paw was small for how large its body was, it was still a bit bigger than Lawrence’s hand.

Lawrence took the opportunity to discreetly check its claws, but he had a feeling that they were much too small to have created the holes in the bell.

“It’s nice to meet you. And that there is, uh...” Lawrence felt a bit embarrassed, so he cleared his throat. “My wife, Holo.”

That was the first time in his life that he learned that squirrels could look astonished.

The squirrel, so surprised it almost fainted, immediately came back to its senses.

“A human...and a wolf...A human and a wolf!”

It looked alternately at Lawrence and then Holo, and its large, round body almost bounced when it said that.

If Lawrence had judged correctly, it almost seemed overjoyed.

"Then my dream of a human and a squirrel being together isn't just a dream!"

It was Lawrence's turn to be surprised; he reflexively turned around to look at Holo, who seemed rather intrigued.

"Heh-heh, oh, but how cheeky would it be for me and the master...? Wait, but..." it said, rubbing its hands together and curling up its tail.

There were rumors that something on this cursed mountain was guarding its territory and killing any intruders.

This squirrel did not seem a likely suspect in the slightest.

"Um," Lawrence called out to get its attention, only for it to jump in surprise and immediately straighten its posture, eyes blinking.

"P-pardon me!" The squirrel curled up and lowered its head, before looking back up with far more speed. *"Oh y-yes, that's right! This is not the time for all this!"* It hopped in place and puffed out its tail to a size larger than its body. *"Please put out that fire quickly! The angel of the mountain is going to get very angry!"*

The words *the angel of the mountain* instantly caught Lawrence's interest, but he could tell the squirrel's expression was frantic.

They did need to hear what it had to say, so he obeyed for the moment.

"Understood. Holo?" Lawrence called to her, and with a bothered sigh, Holo opened her mouth and ate the rabbit roasting on the campfire whole, then dipped her front paw into the stream beside her and put out the fire.

"Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, yes, everything should be all right for now." The squirrel breathed a sigh of relief, then looked apologetically at Lawrence. *"And...could you possibly leave this place? The angel of the mountain might get angry."*

That phrase appeared again, but he could not let it slide this time.

"Is the angel of the mountain that bearded face?"

Then, after a blank stare from the squirrel, it tilted its head.

"Well...I've never seen the angel. Have you?"

“ ... ”

They were not quite on the same page. There was almost no question that it was the squirrel who had planted the trees that currently carpeted the mountain, and it was very likely the squirrel who stood next to that eerie face in the painting at the cathedral.

Was that face the angel of the mountain?

“You were the one who planted the trees here on the mountain, right?”

“Oh yes! Yes! There wasn’t anything on this mountain once upon a time, but now it’s come back like this! I’m sure the master will compliment me!”

The squirrel gleefully jiggled its torso up and down as it spoke. It took a few moments for Lawrence to register that it probably intended to jump. Since it scattered its acorns everywhere and was living in a mountain forest filled with all its favorite trees as far as the eye could see, it had likely indulged a little too much.

That aside, there was something else that caught Lawrence’s attention.

“Who is this master you’ve been mentioning?”

“The master made me his apprentice.”

Even with the face of a squirrel, it could still smile.

Not only that, but just seeing that smile was enough to warm his heart. Lawrence felt like he might get drawn in, but he had to get information from this squirrel in order to solve the mystery of this mountain.

“Is your master...a human? A craftsman, perhaps?”

“Yes. The master has incredible power—something called alchemy.”

The squirrel spoke gleefully, but Lawrence gulped.

He now knew that the legend left behind in the cathedral was not entirely made up.

“Are you an alchemist, too?”

Lawrence suddenly tensed at the innocent question.

This nonhuman was cheerful, pleasant, and a bit airheaded.

But that was the attitude it took with people recognized as allies. In stories of encountering monsters deep in the woods, it was only natural to expect that it might suddenly change its tune when dealing with those who were not considered friends.

If he fumbled in answering that they were not alchemists, and it suddenly turned its claws on them...It was just as that thought crossed his mind...

"We are in a hurry. If you do not tell us everything you know, you may meet the same fate as that rabbit!"

Holo stepped in front of Lawrence, opening her mouth to better display all her sharp fangs, cornering the squirrel.

It was pressure enough to turn the squirrel on its back and make its large, warm eyes go wide in fear.

"Hey, Holo," Lawrence hurriedly admonished her, but she turned her red eyes to look at him.

"You fool. Think back on the rumors of this mountain. If those who enter never come back, then who is it putting those people in their graves? We have someone right here who specializes in digging holes to bury their food!"

Much as a human was a human and a wolf was a wolf, nonhumans were not human.

Holo had prioritized Lawrence's apprehensions precisely because she was not human.

Though she had protected him in a sense, he was a little sad about that.

"I—I have never done anything like that..." The squirrel's voice came from beneath the fallen leaves, where it had buried its head. *"I—I, um...I just scared off the people who wandered into the mountain by pretending to be a bear..."*, the round squirrel confessed, its head still hidden and its exposed tail shivering.

Holo could hear through people's lies, and that was true even for squirrels.

"Well?" Lawrence looked at Holo, who sighed through her snout.

“Had it said pretending to be a wolf, I would have bit its head right off.”

“O-of course I wouldn’t do that...”

The squirrel’s eyes were welling with tears, which roused Lawrence’s protective instincts.

“Holo, don’t scare it too much.”

“Hmph.”

No matter how much of her evil persona was an act, her fangs had quite the impact, which was incredibly effective on squirrels who collected nuts from trees in the forest.

“I’m sorry about the rough treatment.”

“...”

He reached out again, and the squirrel looked with bewilderment at Lawrence, then Holo.

“We came on request of the people from the church. They know about the rumors of this mountain being cursed, but they wanted us to see how much of it was true.”

The squirrel took Lawrence’s hand, lifting its portly body. The look of unease on its face made it seem like it was more afraid of Holo than the mention of Lawrence coming at the command of the church.

“Does that mean...you’re going to ask me to leave the mountain...?”

The squirrel brought its tiny hands to its chest and peered up at Lawrence with round, pleading eyes.

It finally clicked as to why Holo was in such a terrible mood.

She had originally been unwilling to come to the mountain. That was because she knew it was very likely that things would turn out like this if all the rumors were due to a nonhuman living in the mountain.

He turned to Holo, who bitterly looked away, almost as if to say, “I told you so.”

However, Lawrence had also said to her on the way here, *“Things wouldn’t*

turn out so well if someone besides us went.”

Lawrence cleared his throat and turned back to the uneasy squirrel.

“Don’t worry. My wife, Holo, behind me was chased out of the village wheat fields where she’d lived for centuries, too. I’m a merchant very familiar with the world, and she’s a renowned wolf who was once called the wisewolf. We were just hoping to thoroughly investigate the stories about this mountain and lend you our help as much as possible.”

It was an odd pair—a human and a massive, towering wolf who was supposedly his wife, appearing out of nowhere.

Just as Lawrence started to wonder if the squirrel would believe his claims, its nose twitched and it broke into a smile.

“I can smell how close you two are. I’m sure you aren’t bad people.”

Surprised that was a possibility, Lawrence subconsciously sniffed his own clothes, but he could not discern anything useful. It just smelled like Holo since he had spent the night sleeping in her fur.

As they chatted, Holo herself bumped Lawrence on the head.

“You have quite the sharp nose.”

The squirrel blinked, then raised its shoulders and lowered its head as if to shrink itself down.

“But we are not that close. ’Tis simply that this fool cannot leave me.”

Holo bumped Lawrence in a spot that was not quite his head nor his back, but she was likely happy they had been recognized as a loving couple. Noticing her honest tail, Lawrence knew he just had to leave it be.

“And your name?” Holo asked once she was done poking Lawrence.

The squirrel blinked restlessly before nodding.

“M-my name is Tanya!”

“That is quite the fashionable name.”

Lawrence thought it was a rather adorable name, and when he saw the squirrel smile, any possibility it could be named anything other than Tanya

disappeared from his mind. It was truly a brilliant name.

“That’s what the master named me. He said it fit my human form perfectly.”

Right as Lawrence found himself surprised by the idea that it could turn into a human, a change began.

He thought he felt a slight breeze, when there appeared before him a girl with soft, curly, chestnut-colored hair reaching down her back and a gentle expression on her face.

“What do you think?”

She wore an innocent smile, but Lawrence’s face tensed not because Tanya had so carelessly slipped into her human form. It was because he now understood that the alchemist had not given her such a soft-sounding name like Tanya only because of her smile.

And he also understood why Holo, behind him, was emitting such a deep, threatening growl.

“And my name is Holo, Holo the Wisewolf!”

The moment Holo bared her fangs, Tanya fell over again and instantly returned to her squirrel form.

He knew exactly what Holo was so angry about.

Tanya feasted on the bountiful nuts from the trees in this forest.

Holo did not have what the healthy and full-bodied Tanya did.

Tanya was wholly frightened of Holo, but after Lawrence explained that not wearing clothes in front of the opposite sex was practically seduction, he finally managed to calm Tanya down.

There was another reason entirely that Holo was angry, but she seemed to be aware that her own frustration was foolish. When Tanya apologized, saying she had no intentions of seducing Lawrence, Holo reluctantly accepted this.

Now that that was settled, they could finally move on to the topic at hand—the mountain.

“The master and the rest of them suddenly appeared on the mountain one

day. It hadn't been that long since people had left the mountain. It was when I was just starting to plant tree nuts."

Tanya was walking ahead of Lawrence and Holo, taking them to a place that may have been the start of this whole myth.

"There were still people who came to dig up leftover metal back then, and I didn't know what to do. They were ripping up saplings that were just starting to sprout and everything..."

Tanya's tail drooped weakly.

"Then the master said to me that it was a very good thing that I was planting trees and that I should keep it up. That was because there was an angel here in the mountain who had fallen from the sky, and even though it was sleeping, it would become very angry if all the trees went away."

That was likely the story about the fallen angel, but he had a hard time imagining an angel who would be bothered even if all the trees were gone.

"And then he said that things would get bad if we angered the angel even more, so we needed to help the people understand and make sure they didn't come to the mountain anymore."

Tanya had some trouble getting over a boulder that blocked their way.

It did not seem like Holo's skill as a hunter was the reason that she had caught her so quickly.

"Then master and the others produced charcoal from somewhere, extracted metal from the stones left on the mountain, and made a big gate. I have been guarding the gate all this time."

"A gate?"

"Yes. We should be able to see it any moment now."

Tanya the squirrel of course traversed the mountain paths on all fours, but Lawrence could not help but remember her naked human form when he watched her doughy flesh move as she walked, so he found it hard to keep calm.

He had a feeling he heard Holo growling behind him, so he did his best to

keep his eyes away from her.

“The master called down the angel from the gate and showed the people how angry it was. I didn’t see the angel myself, though, heh-heh...It was amazing how everyone panicked. The master is a great alchemist.”

Tanya turned back to look at them, her smile truly delighted.

It sounded like Tanya had lived in this area for ages, and she had been able to do nothing but watch as the mountainside withered as people came in droves to mindlessly extract metal from it.

When the mountain finally stopped producing metal and the people went away, she went straight to work putting trees back on the mountain, but people occasionally came by looking for dregs of accessible ore, trampling all over her hard work in the process.

Then along came a group of alchemists who saved Tanya.

That was how things seemed to have happened.

“Did the angel perhaps do something to the bell in the church?”

When Lawrence asked, Tanya stopped in her tracks and whirled around.

“Yes! I was so surprised! When the angel appeared from the gate, it cast the light of judgment!”

The light of what?

“It didn’t bite into it?”

“Bite it?” Tanya tilted her head and her nose twitched. “Hmm. I don’t know... Maybe I just didn’t notice. But I remember when the master opened the gate, the angel appeared with a bright light, and suddenly, the people by the bell started panicking. Then the important church people kneeled before the master. Way fewer people approached the mountain after that. Just like the master said would happen.”

It sounded like nothing more than a fairy tale, where a story of a saint’s life had gotten all jumbled up. There were stories, for example, of saints appearing in a flood of light from a cave, healing a plague that had spread among the people.

In a similar fashion, she said the angel appeared from the gate the alchemists had created and cast the light of judgment on the church's bell tower, striking fear into all who witnessed the event. In that case, Lawrence could at least understand how they described it as an angel fallen from the sky.

"By the way, why were your master...the alchemists, I mean, here on the mountain?"

"The master and the rest of them are studying the sky."

"The sky?"

"They built the angel gate during the day, then studied the stars in the sky all night, after all. I'm sure they were trying to find out where the angel had fallen from."

Tanya was smiling innocently.

The story was consistent with what they already gathered. However, Lawrence was still somewhat perplexed.

That was because alchemists were even less fearful of God. If he was asked to name a type of person on this planet who had absolutely no faith in the existence of God or angels, alchemists would be the first in line.

Those alchemists could not possibly be searching the sky for the angel's home, could they?

"Where are your masters now?" Lawrence asked, and Tanya's expression quickly clouded over. Her fluffy tail deflated.

"I don't know...They left not long after that, saying they were studying the sky all over the world. I wanted them to stay forever...Isn't the sky the same wherever you go anyway?"

Tanya looked up to the sky, noting another day of dismal cloud cover.

She sighed and started walking again.

"The gate is up ahead."

Lawrence followed Tanya, his feet treading firmly on the layers of fallen leaves beneath him.

Holo was farther behind him; she had been quiet this whole time.

“Here we are. Please wait a moment.”

Tanya rushed ahead and started busily pushing the fallen leaves aside.

Holo then slinked past Lawrence and gave a strong huff from her nose.

“Eep!”

The wind, strong enough to cause ripples on Tanya’s soft body, blasted away all the fallen leaves in a breath. Lawrence was only somewhat exasperated with how rough that was, because his eyes widened at what lay beneath the leaves.

“Is this the gate?”

It was a large disk made of a dark-gray metal, the diameter of it as long as Lawrence was tall, and the whole thing was sunken into the ground. It was stunningly carved. Perhaps this was that eerie face that had been painted in the cathedral?

But...

Lawrence hesitated in making a judgment because the carving was of a single girl.

“Is this the angel you spoke of?” Holo asked.

The girl carved into the gate was detailed enough to match the grand size and craftsmanship of the structure—it almost seemed like she had been painted over it. The girl with her long hair and gentle expression, eyes closed as though she was sleeping, looked more like a saint than an angel.

“No, this is the master’s top apprentice,” Tanya said as she lifted one side of the enormous disk to stand it up. What surprised Lawrence was not Tanya’s strength, but that he had assumed that since it was called a gate, it was covering up something that led underground.

However, it seemed to be nothing more than a simple disk.

Holo brought her nose closer to sniff it, then rounded to the back side, and her eyes widened.

“Look.”

As Holo called to him, she glanced a signal at Tanya, who spun the disk around.

“Oh.”

There was a carving of the imposing face of a bearded man covering the entire disk.

“They carved this for when they summoned the angel.” Tanya spoke cheerfully when she said that, but Lawrence and Holo looked at each other wordlessly.

Most of the roles recorded in the mural were finally coming together.

“But they needed to make sure that the angel wouldn’t come out of the gate after they were finished, so the master carved his top apprentice on the other side.”

“...Does this girl have anything to do with keeping the angel inside the gate?”

“Yes. His top apprentice takes the form of a human, but like me, she is not human. She’s a cat who came from the very far south where there’s nothing but sand.”

“Oh?”

Holo’s interest was piqued when she heard the apprentice was not human.

An alchemist traveling around with a nonhuman, though, would certainly not be surprised to find Tanya on the mountain and would likely help her.

“Since the angel has wings, it’s weak against cats.”

Tanya and her bright smile aside, Lawrence was fascinated by this carving of the girl. It went without saying that the quality of the carving was fantastic, but there was also an air about her, one that was not simple attractiveness but one where he could feel the happiness of the model coming through the static image.

A human alchemist traveling with a nonhuman.

That being said, a cat carved here to contain the angel and its bird wings sounded like a rather contrived reason, if anything.

Lawrence quickly felt the excitement that visited him earlier after hearing

stories about the angel starting to cool. It was likely made up that this disk was the gate and the angel was behind it.

That was because he knew of a simpler reason as to why the alchemist would carve the portrait of a cat avatar whom he called his top apprentice.

“So is the angel beneath this? Is it not an insect?” Holo asked in obvious disgust, digging her claws into the ground where the disk had lay. She had absently flipped over countless stones in search of a place to sit when they lit the campfire, giving a cute squeal each time she did so. It was not because she was a city girl who hated bugs, of course, but because she did not want fleas and mites to infest her tail.

“No...It’s not in the ground. This is it, the gate.”

“Hmm?”

“You hear it a lot in ancient pagan tales. They say if you hang up a well-polished bronze mirror, it can act as a window to the world of the gods and stuff like that,” Lawrence said, then looked to Tanya. “Miss Tanya, have you been watching over the gate this whole time?”

“Yes. I polish it every day, and...”

She quietly placed the disk down, stuck her hand in the crack of a nearby rock, and produced a well-worn, ragged hemp sack. Inside were all sorts of hammers and chisels.

“I keep his top apprentice looking clean, since she makes sure the angel will never get out, and recently I’ve started adding flower designs along the edges.”

Now that she had mentioned it, Lawrence realized that the reason the girl carved into the disk seemed so brilliant was because of the flower patterns that surrounded her. The ornamentation itself was remarkably delicate, something the impatient Holo would give up on after a day’s attempts.

At the same time, two more points clicked together in Lawrence’s head.

It was one of the legends that still haunted this mountain.

The *clang, clang* of ghosts still mining for metal that echoed throughout the mountain night after night.

“Could it be that you work on that mostly at night, then?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t want humans to see me, of course.”

Tanya spoke with such pride, and Lawrence looked toward Holo.

Holo huffed in exasperation.

“In that case, Miss Tanya, does that mean you don’t know how to open the gate?”

“Yes, that’s true. But when the master was teaching me how to chisel, he said he would surely come again to teach me. Until then, I’m to maintain the gate and keep planting trees on the mountain.”

The chisels Tanya held in hand were considerably worn. The hemp sack, also likely given to her by the alchemist, had decayed so much that it barely functioned as a receptacle.

According to what he heard at the inn, and to the records of the bell casting that Elsa had found in the cathedral, Tanya must have met the alchemist some fifty or sixty years ago.

A human’s life was not that long. So long as the alchemist had not obtained the legendary philosopher’s stone and the perennial youth and long life said to come with it, he would certainly never return to the mountain again.

Lawrence almost said as much, but he stopped himself short.

Not only was he in Holo’s presence, but he did not want to take Tanya’s smile away, either.

“The flower decorations are lovely; I’m sure your master will compliment you on them.”

When Lawrence said that, Tanya’s tail stood in delight, and she bounced in place.

Tanya still had much more to share with them, but what they quickly discovered was that Tanya had not learned much in detail from the alchemists. Additionally, the disk was not much more than a lump of metal, and it was unlikely there was some sort of mysterious trick behind it.

As Lawrence sat and watched Tanya chisel away, Holo sniffed the area but reported that she did not find anything in the end. It was unlikely that there was a fallen angel of any sort secreted away somewhere on the mountain.

And so Lawrence and Holo waited for the sun to set before going down the mountain.

Tanya accompanied the both of them to the foot of the mountain to see them off and gave them a basket, woven from tree bark, overflowing with acorns as a souvenir. Lawrence almost laughed at how fairy tale-like it was, but she had meant for it to be a little gesture of thanks, leaving them to care for the mountain.

As he watched her return to the mountain alone in the dark of night, he felt a pang in his chest.

Since before Lawrence was born, before even his grandfather's day, Tanya had lived alone in the mountain.

But while she waited and waited for the return of the alchemist she respected and called her master, she and the mountain were left to the whims of the passing of time.

"*Dear,*" Holo called to Lawrence as they quietly dashed through the woods at the base of the mountain.

"What is it?" Lawrence asked in return, but Holo said nothing, and he felt no need to follow up. It had been a long time since they had been married, and even though Holo called him dull, Lawrence knew how she felt.

She wanted to let Tanya stay on the mountain, quietly waiting for the alchemist to return, for as long as possible.

Holo need not say anything, because that was what he intended to try to ensure.

"A squirrel avatar?"

When they returned to the cathedral, Elsa treated them to some bread she had baked earlier in the day.

When she saw the mountain of acorns Lawrence had brought back, she had

mentioned that they could save some food money by grinding them into a powder and mixing it into bread, which made Holo shudder. Even a wolf would recoil from the awful taste of acorn bread.

“I see. So that is what’s been happening on the mountain,” Elsa said quietly once she was finished listening to Lawrence’s report. “While that gives me a better grasp of who the figures in the mural are...the mystery of the bell remains unsolved.”

Holo munched on her bread, defiantly swallowed it, then said, “What do you plan to do with the mountain?”

The glint in her eye was different from the usual competitive streak she had with Elsa.

Even though she seemed angry, there was something hiding behind that sharp expression.

It was concern over the fate of those who had lived in the era when the moon and the forests held primacy, who lost their homes when the human world cast the light of modern times onto them—something she had seen over and over.

“I never noticed the existence of that land...Would it satisfy you if I continued to pretend to act as such?”

They were in the reception dining hall of the empty cathedral. In a corner of the unnecessarily long dining table, Lawrence and the other two sat having their meal. There was a glass bowl filled with water sitting on the table; the light from the candle that floated in it, illuminating the entire bowl, was surprisingly bright.

Yet, when none of them spoke, the silence was unbearably heavy for how dazzling it was.

As Lawrence stared at the glittering bowl, he said, “Even if you return to your village pretending not to notice it, that doesn’t mean the mountain will suddenly vanish. Sooner or later, someone will take up the matter again.”

When he said that, Elsa closed her eyes and sighed. “Unfortunately, I believe that is the case.”

Holo turned her discontent toward her bread and took no more bites.

Since Tanya had taken such good care of the mountain, it had quickly recovered into a thick and lush place. Without the rumors of curses, it was clear that it had value as an asset.

“If we sold the mountain, then it would make life easier for the people of the bishopric. They could dig new wells, improve the road going to the town on the other side of the mountain, and they could even build an inn in the village. If not, then you know the times we live in. The clergy who come to work here might not be able to stand the shame of having a cursed mountain in their territory, so they might want to let it go.”

If the Church was asking for the elimination of corruption, then they would not simply call it a day after throwing out all the accumulated assets. The clergy would want to restore the righteousness of conduct, honor, faith, and everything else that entailed.

The reason Holo frowned so was because Col and her daughter, Myuri, were partially the cause of why things were the way they were today.

“Then does that mean you’d still want to sell the mountain, Miss Elsa?”

When Lawrence asked, she turned to him with such an intense look that it made even him flinch.

“Do not think me such a miser. Even I can feel sympathy, you know.”

The prim and stuffy girl had vanished.

Yet, the way Elsa was now made her seem like the ideal woman of the cloth.

Seemingly embarrassed at having snapped like that, she turned away, easing the tension in her shoulders with a sigh and continuing with “...But to be honest, I do want to share the blessings of such a bountiful mountain with the people. I’ve been researching all sorts of things, and I’ve found that this area has been a drain on the Church’s assets for a very long time.”

Even Lawrence had immediately thought of several ways to make a fortune when he laid eyes on the mountain. Considering how full of acorns it was, letting pigs roam free out there would undoubtedly be fruitful; trees of that sort

also made for excellent firewood, so it would be worthwhile to cut them down. To top it all off, trade was booming; with more and more ships being built nowadays, timber and coal fetched a high price at market. There was plenty of demand, so even if transport for lumber was a hassle, they could burn charcoal and export it.

“But that is the result of that little fool’s hard work. No human has done anything,” Holo interjected sharply. “And despite the thick leaf cover throughout the mountain, there are still stones with metal scattered about. It has not entirely run out of metal. The trees and water simply dried up, and as the humans say, the scales did not even out. If humans were to venture into the mountain again, ’twould only be a matter of time before they noticed the metal. And mining would begin anew as soon as that happened!”

There was also plenty of lumber for refining. But then Tanya would have no choice but to watch as the mountainside died out again. And if humans returned to the mountain, it was hard to tell how well she would be able to keep the gate concealed. She would eventually lose all the greenery she had regained with single-minded determination, lose the gate with which she had been entrusted, and ultimately lose all her ties to the alchemists. In the end, she would be forced to plant trees on a naked mountain face alone once again after several more decades, or perhaps even centuries. All while waiting for the alchemists to return.

Lawrence’s chest tightened when he pictured that, but it was Holo, who sat beside him, who shed tears first.

“...That fool.”

She stood, kicking back the chair, and left the dining hall.

She had only nibbled her bread and barely touched her alcohol.

Lawrence began to rise from his chair, but he could not bring himself to move any farther.

Even if he chased after Holo, he had no idea what he should say to her.

“It really makes one feel powerless, doesn’t it?”

When Elsa spoke quietly, Lawrence lowered himself back into his seat.

“...Yes, it really does.”

The light flooding from the glass bowl was trembling, perhaps because Holo had shaken it.

The things that anyone tried to hold dear to themselves in this cruel world were nothing more than transient light that quivered at the slightest of changes.

“But...besides the cruelty of this world, I also feel the slightest bit of anger toward that alchemist.”

Elsa was just about to rip a piece of bread off when she froze.

“You do? Why?”

“Miss Tanya said that the alchemist had been traveling with a cat avatar. That should at least mean that he knew how long nonhumans lived and how different their life span was from humans. Then...”

There must have been something more they could have done for Tanya.

Elsa weakly placed her bread back down on the table.

“Then...indeed, that eerie mural about the mountain might not have been painted by someone from the church but perhaps commissioned by the alchemist.”

When Lawrence turned to her, he noticed Elsa was not looking at him but at the images re-creating passages from the scripture on the dining hall walls.

“Even if they pretended the mountain was cursed, it would soon have been forgotten as generations passed without leaving or maintaining any records. But it will remain in memory for hundreds of years if made into a painting. It was likely a parting gift to protect that heroic squirrel, so that no one would ever dare venture into the mountain, given to her in his stead, since he would never be able to go back there.”

Nonhumans lived much, much longer than humans did.

The alchemist whom Tanya admired and called “master” was likely no longer of this world, but the painted mural in the church still remained.

“The alchemist had no intentions of coming back, did he?”

When Lawrence asked, Elsa shook her head.

“That I do not know, but he went through the trouble of carving the image of the cat girl he called his top apprentice on the gate, did he not? My impression is, after hearing it from you...that he did plan on coming back. If nothing else, once that cat girl found herself alone, he must have intended it to be a destination for her.”

Lawrence had thought the same when he saw the engraving of the girl. Just like how he wanted to leave behind a painting of Holo in Atiph, the alchemist must have left behind that disk so that even if the girl became stranded by the flow of time, she could still reunite with the boundlessly cheerful Tanya one day.

That must have been why he had come up with the idea to create the story of the angel.

The alchemist had likely put on some kind of magic trick in order to keep people away from the mountain.

That made much more sense to Lawrence.

“But there is no universal solution to any problem. Even the scripture was originally carved into a stone tablet; had the tablet not been replicated over and over again and then transcribed onto innumerable pieces of parchment, then its message surely would not have survived into the present day.”

“Do you mean to say that in order to help Miss Tanya, who’s been left alone in the mountain, we will need something new to patch up her situation?”

“Not so much a new patch but a new bottle. The scripture says we mustn’t pour new wine into old bottles, you see.”

Indeed, if they mangled their attempt to help, then it would only delay the problem by a few years at most. The fundamental problem was that this bishopric was poor, and the reality was that selling the mountain would make them good and very much needed money.

They had managed to endure this long under the shroud of a curse. But at this

time of the Church's reformation, that line of reasoning was becoming compromised. That was why they needed a new shroud if they wanted to protect both the mountain and Tanya. Something that would protect the place and bar the way of anyone who wanted to intrude on that sanctuary.

Lawrence sat back in his chair, looked again at the flickering light in the glass bowl, and contemplated.

Just as he had helped Selim—who was now looking after the bathhouse in Nyohhira, for example—could he conversely stage a miracle and have the mountain recognized as holy ground? The thought crossed his mind, but it sounded much too difficult for a place seen as cursed for such a long time to suddenly be transformed into holy ground. That had even less of an edge, considering the legend of the alchemists still remained to this day.

Since the locals knew the stories about this being a cursed mountain, Elsa thought that no one would buy it, which was why she had to look to the faraway Atiph and its bishop for help in the first place. That is why she was wondering if there would be a merchant who would selfishly buy it up, paying no mind to talk about curses.

At that moment, Lawrence suddenly lifted his head.

"A merchant?" he murmured, and Elsa blinked in surprise. "A merchant...a merchant, huh?"

"What is it?" Elsa asked, and Lawrence attempted to respond.

He was accompanied by the feeling of a large waterwheel slowly starting to turn.

"Why don't you sell the mountain off to a merchant like you originally planned?"

"What? That's...But why, all of a sudden?"

"Just bear with me for a moment, um..."

Lawrence closed his eyes and placed his hand on his forehead, turning some gears somewhere in his head that had remained dormant for a long time.

The merchants' web of interests was wholly unlike running a bathhouse. It

was a spider's tapestry that stretched far and wide.

Back when he was traveling with Holo, he went to great pains trying to trace the thread that constantly hung down before him.

Lawrence now, however, after all his experience and with more years behind him, had built up many connections that often led him to encounter unexpected people in unexpected places.

If he used this thread to weave a new cloth, he had a feeling it could completely cover the mountain from view.

"Yes, a merchant. I have connections to a company whose mainstay is mining and where the avatar of a rabbit is involved in its management. If we can demonstrate that it is profitable, then he may show interest in buying the mountain."

Elsa's honey-colored eyes widened, and the faint freckles on her cheeks were quickly covered by a scarlet blush.

"And he would even mind our lost little lamb...or rather, our lost little *squirrel*, wouldn't he?"

"But it would be pointless if we were to propose ore mining as the principal draw. We would need a twist like, for example, that they must burn charcoal at a sustainable rate, and I'm certain that this company—the Debau Company—would never lack a need for coal considering how many mines they have and how much metal they must refine on a regular basis."

Elsa's expression glowed at the possibility of having this whole incident end with the admirable squirrel living happily ever after, but her face suddenly clouded over.

"Miss Elsa?" Lawrence asked, and Elsa bitterly bit her lip.

"But...how much would a mountain solely used for charcoal burning go for?"

Elsa kept her hair neatly in a bun, always had her back straight, and could calmly assert what was right.

The woman wore priest robes for temporarily taking care of this cathedral.

"This Debau Company would certainly purchase the mountain if it were

cheap. And with the rabbit avatar, it is very likely that he would use the property rights as a shield to keep outsiders from approaching the mountain, keeping Tanya the squirrel safe. However, I have my own duties. I have a responsibility to liquidate assets at as high a price as I can manage for the sake of this diocese. I cannot sell a mountain that...might still have ore to be mined for cheap.”

I’m glad Holo isn’t here, Lawrence thought.

That decidedly was not because he thought Holo would fly off the handle because Elsa was digging in her heels, squashing the bud of a perfectly good possibility.

It was because Holo would not get the wrong idea about Elsa, whom she respected for her fair-minded spirit and as someone who never forgot what was just.

“I’m an ex-merchant who owns a bathhouse. I’m rather good at staring at account books.”

When Lawrence said that, the valleys between Elsa’s brows in her pained expression eased a bit.

“Do you have a general idea of how much you’re expecting from the purchase, Miss Elsa?”

Vitality immediately filled her expression at the practical question. The very serious Col had once called Elsa sober and sincere. She had likely read every single letter of every single moldy account book left behind in this church.

“Yes. God says that we must ready large vessels for large things and small vessels for small things. It is not that I hope to sell everything and anything at a high price—I simply want it to be fair.”

“Then let’s do some calculations. I’ll use all my wisdom in order to sell this mountain. After all.” Lawrence smiled. “You called me here to do just that to begin with.”

Elsa smiled in turn, then stood.

“Please wait a moment. I will go retrieve some tools.”

Elsa left in high spirits, exiting via a different door than the one Holo used. Once her footsteps faded into the distance, Lawrence stood from his chair once more. Holo, who had so hurriedly left the room, was certainly waiting for him.

However, he was not going to see Holo in order to console her. Though she may have felt beaten down by powerlessness, he needed her wisdom for his calculations. As all these thoughts crossed his mind, he opened the door right behind his chair.

He then instantly could sniff out the scent of flowers coming from the oils that Holo always applied to her tail, even in the dark.

She stood leaning against the wall beside the door on her tiptoes, her lips drawn into a pout, her arms folded behind her back, her shoulders slightly raised.

“You look like a girl who’s been stood up.” The words unconsciously came tumbling out of Lawrence’s mouth, and Holo turned her red eyes, glimmering in the nighttime hallway, on him.

“You fool. I dashed out in grief, yet you did not immediately follow me.”

Lawrence gave her a tired, wry smile as he opened his arms wide to bundle her into a hug.

Holo’s tail whacked defiantly against Lawrence’s legs, but she did not try to escape.

“Holo, I need your wisdom as the ruler of the woods. If we were to cut down trees from the mountain, how much could we cut so that it doesn’t go bare again?”

Even a logger with fifty years’ experience would be no match against Holo and her wisdom.

Holo lifted her head from Lawrence’s chest and huffed.

If they turned all the assets buried within the bishopric into gold, they could use those proceeds to better the lives of the people. As such, selling a mountain covered in trees that could still possibly produce metal for an appropriate price could be seen as an act in accordance with God’s just will. The number they

arrived at was born from that perspective, yet when Lawrence began to list all the things one could earn from the mountain, it immediately revealed how far away that possibility was.

“We may be able to rush growth by changing the type of tree and tending to it.”

Holo and her centuries’ worth of forest knowledge offered some advice, but that only added a bit to the number scrawled on the wax-covered wooden board.

As a traveler, Lawrence always gawked at how expensive coal and fuel was, and he was shocked at how high the prices reached in Atiph’s booming lumber trade. And so along the way, it might have been help to a troubled lord whose village was weighed down by unrest because of the rising timber prices.

But once they put the numbers together, all he could do was stare in shock at the difference between that and the calculations of the mountain’s profits as a mine.

He could do nothing but sigh in admiration at the numbers from the account books of the past that Elsa showed him.

“Mines make so much money...”

Dancing along the pages of the books that Elsa drew out from the vault, the figures he saw could only be described as blinding. It was said that the amount of coal needed to gain a fist-sized lump of metal was a full bag big enough to fit an entire person inside, so the prices of metal versus coal as products were already on a vastly different scale.

“While those in power do fight over mines, wars do not start over charcoal-burning huts.”

Elsa looked up from the accounts as well and spoke in a dejected manner. The small pair of glasses she kept nearby, sitting on parchment, shone with a dull light.

“Pig grazing would only earn pocket change in comparison, and cultivating mushrooms would only add color to the meals the inn provides.”

When Lawrence said that, Holo interjected, “We should plant fruit trees. Does the wheat trade not thrive across the mountain? Fruit to put on bread would most certainly be quite popular.”

“Picking fruit is time consuming. And Miss Tanya is a squirrel. It would be like leaving you to mind sheep.”

Holo was about to protest before she closed her mouth in vexation. She likely imagined the pain of having to hold herself back in the face of something that was less like a bit of a snack and more of a bountiful feast.

“Could we mine a bit of metal at a time and then sell it?”

When Elsa brought it up, Lawrence’s expression turned bitter.

“Reaching the nearest markets would mean following narrow roads that pass through several steep mountains. Carrying the ore as is would not be profitable at all, and either way, I can see the price being beat right down if sold unrefined. If we can’t get the ore refined, then I think it would be hard to balance the books without carrying vast amounts by ship.”

“There are no rivers large enough to send boats—you’re right,” Elsa said quietly with a sigh. “We have to refine it, don’t we?”

“I believe so.”

And so in order to create enough heat to refine the metal, they would need a considerable amount of lumber. They would need to build furnaces, hire people to oversee the furnaces, construct houses for those people to live in, and so on and so on. On top of that, since they would have to gather people and burn all that lumber, they would need to refine an appropriate amount of ore in order for it to be profitable, and by digging out all the ore they needed, they would ultimately end up harming the mountain.

The more calculations he did, the only thing Lawrence learned was that his idea was nothing more than a pie in the sky.

“A way to sell the mountain at a high price...hmm,” Elsa, who was the furthest anyone could be from dealing with monetary figures, said as she held her head in her hands.

She stared hard at the numbers in the account books; if the passages written in the scripture could not even save people, then how could this be of any help?

Sitting beside the groaning Elsa and Lawrence, Holo smacked the table.

“We are selling this to a rabbit, no?! Then I shall make him buy at a high price with my fangs!”

It would be better still if she said that out of a hastily drawn conclusion and short temper.

“Not only that, but I could even dig up the metal stones with my claws and carry what I dig far away myself. We would soon make our money back!”

That might have been entirely possible with Holo’s claws and her legs, which could cross the mountain on the horizon in a single night. But that was from the age of spirits, when power alone ruled all; needless to say, digging mines was a little more complicated.

“Ore in mines aren’t distributed equally throughout the mountain. You’d have to dig along the ore veins. You’d have to drain the groundwater, build support beams so the shafts don’t collapse, and tunnel through everywhere and anywhere. That’s why we need so many people and materials. It’s an operation on a completely different scale from running a bathhouse. Your power alone wouldn’t be enough to solve this.”

Holo groaned in frustration, and Lawrence took her hand, silently comforting her.

The era that could be navigated through strength alone ended long ago.

“It was a good idea, though...”

When Lawrence admitted that with a sigh, Holo said, “It indeed was! You are never aggressive enough!”

Despite her accusations, she did not try to shake off the hand that held hers.

She instead gripped even tighter, making it clear she was praying for him to deny what she said.

“If only the mountain came with some sort of privileges.” Elsa sighed, flipping through one of the account books one page at a time.

“Like tax exemption?”

“There is that, too, but taking for example things I’ve seen in other Church lands, property that confers peerage, that sort of thing. That went for a very high price to a merchant who recently made quite a bit of money at a big market.”

The lands Elsa was referring to came with titles, like Earl of the Something or Other, given to those who ruled over specific plots and counties.

Even the most barren wasteland would have a buyer if it came with a title.

“Can you not make something up yourself?” Holo asked Elsa, still gripping Lawrence’s hand.

Elsa glanced at their joined hands, gave a tired sigh, then responded, “In theory, it is not impossible. We could say something like, by purchasing this land, you are bestowed the right to run a small church. However, would someone from the Debau Company pay money out of a want to declare themselves a priest or abbot that is a title in name only?”

Hilde, the rabbit embodiment, would not likely want to do that at all.

“Arghhh...,” Holo groaned, hitting the leg of the chair with her tail, then grasping Lawrence’s shoulder. “Do you not have any ideas...?”

Images of herself in the wheat fields she was chased from were likely superimposed over those of Tanya on the mountain.

And since Lawrence had been sharp enough to realize it, Holo most certainly knew that the alchemist would never be returning to the mountain again.

For Holo, who would live for centuries, her unavoidable parting with Lawrence was on the horizon.

Saving Tanya was the same as saving herself.

“There is a slight chance, but I do have something.”

“What?!”

The shocked Holo aside, Elsa looked at him dubiously.

“Mr. Lawrence?”

Her expression read, “Why are you bringing this up now?” But Lawrence answered with a grim sigh. “It’s that angel that appears in the myth. If we include that, then we might be able to sell it at a high price.”

Holo stared blankly at him, then suddenly drew her brows up. “You are going to sell what is so precious to that little fool?!”

“No. That metal disk is just a disk. But the mural painted in the church is pretty much exactly what happened in real life. The only impossibilities are the angel coming out of that disk and the bell that’s been left in storage here.” Lawrence took Holo’s hand and shook it slightly. “If we think about the whole picture, then it’s essentially a tall tale made up by the alchemists to keep people off the mountain. But what if that was what really happened?”

Elsa even forgot to blink, and she said, “...You mean refining metal without coal, right?”

Metal was incredibly expensive because the fuel for refining cost money. If there was an angel out there that could refine metal without using fire, then the people who owned mines would certainly light up and want it.

“...Where is this angel? Where might we catch it?”

That was the problem.

“Could the angel be...erm, a bird like you? If I recall correctly, there was a bird who could breathe fire among the tales of the pagan gods...”

Elsa’s question was extremely reasonable, but Holo glanced at Lawrence for confirmation.

“Your face tells me you do not agree.”

“I think...the title of *angel* might have just been a means to an end that the alchemists left behind.”

They had carved that stern, bearded face over the entire disk likely as a part of a grandiose play. Carving the image of the girl they had brought along afterward was most certainly not for keeping the angel at bay.

The alchemist did not believe in the gods, Tanya had said.

He had said that once she masterfully wielded her chisels, he would return to

teach her the secrets of the gate.

If the incident with the angel was not a tall tale, then there were very few possibilities he could think of.

“I wonder if the story of the angel was actually a scheme the alchemists conjured up to obscure their unique technology?”

“Technology?”

Elsa furrowed her brows and dropped her gaze to the table. What she held in her hands was a beautiful pair of glasses, something that could be called a glassblower’s jewel. With those, even someone with the worst eyesight could see letters clearly, and they had plenty of other uses, too. When Lawrence had bought a pair for Selim, who they had left in charge of the bathhouse for the duration of their trip, she had been shocked, as though she had witnessed magic.

Perhaps what the alchemists had used was new technology that no one else even knew yet, and that was the key to the disk they called a gate’s secret.

“You say that the gate opened, the angel came out, and it created holes in the bell in the bell tower. You say there is technology that can re-create that?”

Lawrence as he was now could not precisely say what that might be. But if there was any kind of breakthrough to be had, that was the only place he could see it happening.

At the very least, it felt much more possible than a priestess, a merchant, and the embodiment of a wolf all silently sitting together, trying to catch an angel. At that moment, Holo suddenly spoke up.

“Metal refinement is what you said...That must be dreadfully hot, no...?”

Lawrence and Elsa turned to look at Holo, whose ears and tail suddenly stood on end. She yelled, “The key! Give me the basement key!”

“Huh, what?”

Holo disregarded the bewildered Elsa and was already running off.

After Elsa and Lawrence stared blankly as they watched her dash out of the dining hall, her angry cry of “What are you dawdling for?!” brought them back

to their senses, and they chased after her.

Holo waited for them impatiently at the vault door, and when Elsa opened it, she dashed inside at full speed. She then pulled away the cover over the bell, dropped to her knees, and stuck her nose to the bell.

“I knew it.” She stood up, grabbed Lawrence’s sleeve, and buried her nose into it—not to blow her nose but to instead inhale deeply—then said, “These holes were not created by force. They were...Look, this must have been scooped out, like scraped cheese.”

“Like cheese...? But not by force?” It was like a riddle, but Lawrence finally realized what she was getting at. “You mean it was melted?”

“Aye. The holes are much too smooth. Any sort of claws, fangs, or even a bird’s beak could never create something like that. ’Tis because of that that I was unable to see how these holes had been opened.”

Holo crouched back down by the bell, stuck her finger in, and lightly brushed her finger against the edge.

But even if this was the result of some sort of melting, how had it happened? Lawrence’s own common sense was being violently rattled. If those holes were caused because they had been melted away, the only thing that came to mind was if a heated metal rod had been pressed against the bell, much like what would happen if the same rod was pressed up against cheese.

More importantly, contact with a red-hot metal rod would not produce holes like this.

Above all, such a mundane display would not pass into legend.

“That is all I know,” Holo said with regret and stood. “Technology and whatnot is of the human world. ’Tis a powerful weapon of yours; it ended our era and chased us deeper and deeper into what was left of the forests.”

Humans, with their brainpower and untiring efforts, invented all sorts of tools in order to cut down trees no single person would have been able to down alone. They could bury rivers and even carve up whole mountainsides. What Holo was alluding to was the irony that if there was a way to save Tanya, then it was certainly part of that detestable technology.

“Well, I’m certain some of those things are helpful, like that.” Holo gave a troubled smile and pointed at a small piece of glass the astonished Elsa had in her hands—her glasses, which she had brought all the way from the dining hall.

“But an angel came out of the gate, cast the light of judgment, melted the bell, and also melted the metal? Does technology like that...?”

Lawrence scratched his head as he racked his brain, frantically recalling the conversation with Tanya, wondering if there might be any sort of clue he had overlooked. If the alchemist had not lied and had truly intended to teach her the secret of the angel, then the metal disk left in her care must not be entirely pointless. It was, without a doubt, a necessary tool in summoning the angel.

The gate. The metal gate.

Lawrence groaned. “Why is it a gate anyway?”

He did not even know why that was. Tanya had said the master opened the gate and then the angel came out.

Opened the gate? But it was just a metal disk.

Lawrence produced a single silver coin from the wallet attached to his waist.

On one side of it was the image of a stern, bearded face, much like the disk.

“You said it was like a metaphor, no?”

“That’s true, but...”

Open the gate, and the angel comes out. But what was more, once they were finished with it, they engraved the image of a cat girl on the other side of the bearded face in order to keep the angel from getting out.

Was that for truly meaningless, emotional reasons?

Lawrence turned the silver coin he pinched between his fingers, as though opening a gate.

“Oh, hrm, stop.” Holo squinted and grumbled because the light of the candle Elsa held in her hands had glinted off the silver coin and caught her in the eyes. Lawrence hurriedly started to apologize, but his mouth froze in place.

Elsa was worried about Holo, who kept blinking her eyes and rubbing them.

Lawrence's eyes were anchored on Elsa's hands. She had a piece of glass, created from special technology, which glinted brighter than the coin. Then there was the light reflected off the silver coin.

All the pieces were starting to come together in his mind.

"Dear...?"

"Mr. Lawrence?"

Both Holo and Elsa called out to him, worried.

Then, as though being guided by their voices, he looked up at the ceiling.

There was the answer.

"I figured it out."

Holo and Elsa, huddled close like sisters separated only in age, did the same.

There was a simple pattern of light. The pattern came from the light emanating from the candle in Elsa's hands, reflected off the glittering bell.

But there was a round pattern, and Elsa held something else important. Her reading aid had another use.

And then there was the engraving of the cat girl, which according to Tanya was created to make sure the angel did not appear unless the gate was properly opened.

There had been meaning in everything Tanya had mentioned relating to the myth.

"Miss Elsa, I found our angel."

"What?"

"What you have in your hands is something called an angel's tear."

Elsa, with a blank expression, looked back and forth between the glasses in her hand and Holo.

It was Holo who reacted first.

"Will it help her?"

Lawrence said, "If I'm wrong, then you can bite my head clean off."

Holo's eyes widened, then she shrunk down, flicked her ears and tail, and grinned a fang-filled grin.

If Lawrence's guess was correct, then all they could do was to check and see if it was accurate or not once the sun rose. He relayed that to Holo, but she became much clearer minded now that something had finally been settled on, much more than himself, so she would not let him have a quick shut-eye.

She threw off her clothes and returned to her wolf form before he could say anything, then lay on her stomach and stared hard at him.

He was sure that if he did not climb on, she would either stay like that until morning or reach out to swallow him whole.

"Take care," Elsa said, half in exasperation and half in worry, as she picked up Holo's scattered clothes with a practiced hand, as though this was a common occurrence.

"You should write a letter with your proposal to sell the mountain and wait for us," Holo bade Elsa and dashed off before Lawrence was wholly on her back.

The wind whipping in his ears was harsher than it had been the other night. He could sense how motivated Holo was from the vigor of her feet pounding the ground. He could feel her body heat, which was almost burning, coming from beneath the tufts of fur that he clung to.

Holo ran at full speed for the sake of those who had quietly been swallowed up by the flow of time.

She fervently wrote down all the everyday moments that spilled endlessly out from her living memory into her diary.

Some would no doubt sneer at her for insisting on such a useless struggle.

But they had come this far, vowing to each other to treasure these things, these moments.

That is why Lawrence did not complain as Holo leaped into the woods at the foot of the mountain, dodging trees, vaulting over rocks, and hauling herself up the steep mountain slopes by tooth and claw, almost as though she had forgotten he was on her back.

They found Tanya where the metal disk had been hidden. It was the first night in a while without any clouds, so she had likely been working by the light of the moon, asleep on the disk with her chisels still in hand.

Just as the moon was about to slip below the horizon, she noticed Holo and the heat emanating from her body and awoke with a start, leaping to her feet.

Lawrence slid from Holo's back and asked the bewildered and baffled Tanya, "When the angel came out of the gate, did it come from this side?" He pointed to the side with the engraving of the cat avatar girl, where Tanya had been engraving tiny flower patterns on it.

"Y-yes, that's right..."

All right.

That meant that, just as the alchemist said, the image of the girl was to prevent the angel from coming out. The one thing that was different from reality was that the image itself was the lid that sealed the angel.

"And before the girl was engraved on it, the gate was polished to be very, very clean. Am I wrong?"

Tanya's eyes widened, and her nose twitched. It was as though she had sensed something coming.

"Th-that's exactly right. Um, does this mean...?"

The chisels she had been gripping as she slept fell from her relatively small hands.

What gently broke their fall was the carpet of leaves that came from the trees Tanya had spent decades cultivating.

"Yes. I solved the mystery of the angel."

When Lawrence said that, Tanya's small black nose quivered, and she stood stone-still.

Behind her, he could already see the gradually lightening sky and the outline of the mountain.

"Miss Tanya, could you please lift the gate?"

“O-okay.”

Flustered, Tanya grasped the disk and heaved it up.

The girl, eyes closed, smiling, stood out in the pale-blue light of dawn.

“This technology wasn’t all that great a secret.”

Tanya supported the disk, just like her counterpart in the cathedral’s mural, and turned to Lawrence with a surprisingly intense expression, her whiskers quivering.

“B-but when the master summoned the angel, he surprised a lot of people.”

“He did. But it works under the same principle as when people who have seen squirrels in the forest before mistake you for a bear.”

“Huh...?”

Lawrence smiled and said, “Even if people have seen one thing before, if they catch a glimpse of the same thing on a much grander scale, it can easily become a miracle.”

Lawrence watched a deep shadow grow at his own feet. It deepened, a harbinger of a magnificent sunrise just about to show its face, as though blessing the coming day.

Tanya squinted in the bright light, and the girl on the disk was smiling, her eyes closed.

It was almost as though she anticipated what would come next.

“I don’t think the angel will completely reveal itself since we have a cat avatar in the way, though.”

It happened right after Lawrence said that. Beyond the long ridgeline of the mountain range, far beyond the horizon that stretched across the great plains that had been nicknamed the region’s breadbasket, the sun revealed itself.

A flood of light poured into the concave section of the giant disk with such force that it almost seemed to make a rushing sound.

“Ah, ahhh!”

Tanya opened her little round eyes as wide as she could, staring hard at what

was happening in the moment.

The light pouring into the depression in the disk reflected back out, according to nature's providence. And though the engraving of the girl disrupted it a bit, the lens was so well constructed that the flood of light was concentrated into one tight beam, all of it pointing toward a single point in the distance.

"It's an eyeglass, Holo," Lawrence said, and Holo, who had been laying on her stomach this whole time, stood up.

"I warned Miss Selim when I gave her a pair." Lawrence turned around and explained further. "You can't place them in direct sunlight because they'll gather the light and might even set paper aflame."



Holo opened her mouth slightly, revealing a mouthful of fangs, and stared at how the metal disk, polished every day by Tanya, shimmered with unmatched intensity.

Light that was painful to look at seemed to pour out of it as though a gate had actually been opened, like there was an entirely different world behind it, illuminating the trunks of trees that had yet to be touched by ordinary daylight.

“Glasses need to be polished well—otherwise they won’t make text easier to read or be of any use in place of flint. I bet the dip in this metal disk works so well *because* it was adjusted to perfection by a professional. And that is also the very reason why they carved the image of a girl into it once they were finished.”

So that once it reflected light again, it would not cause a fire. Small eyeglasses that could fit in one’s hand could even cause paper to catch fire; Lawrence could only imagine with a tense smile what sort of chaos a massive disk this large could cause after gathering the full strength of the sun.

Of course it could melt a bronze bell and even refine metal.

“Oh, oh...”

Tanya let slip a sob and released the disk.

The massive metal disk wavered and was close to crushing Lawrence’s feet, but he avoided the danger thanks to Holo grabbing him by the nape of his neck and pulling him back. As the scattered leaves fell back to the ground, glittering, Tanya wept, crouching down on the spot. It was an odd way to shed tears after solving the mystery of the gate.

But soon, Lawrence, too, realized why.

Tanya might have been a little dull, but she surely had some idea how long humans lived. She was most likely pretending that she hardly knew better.

The alchemist was never coming back.

The idea that the mystery would forever remain a mystery, that memories of that time would remain in place and would never be replaced, that the past already carved in her heart could never be painted over in new colors—

—Lawrence had just undone the spell that let her believe all those things.

For a moment, Lawrence wondered if he should not have solved the mystery of the gate. Then Tanya could have carried on fooling herself, living forever in her memories. Even if she had been chased from the mountain, she may have moved, carrying the disk on her back, spending her days in whatever new home she found in peace and quiet.

All while dreaming dreams that deceived herself—that the mystery would forever be a mystery, that the past would always be as she wanted it to be, and that, surely, the alchemist would return to her one day.

That was what Lawrence thought, but Holo suddenly nudged him from behind.

And before Lawrence could protest, Holo made her way toward Tanya and began wildly licking her cheeks with her massive tongue. It looked like a wolf checking to see how its prey tasted, but when Tanya looked up, she clung to Holo's front leg. Holo licked Tanya's back as she did so; then when she lay on her stomach, she drew near to the fluffy part at the scruff of her neck.

"We live a long time," Holo said, then after looking down at the sobbing Tanya, she turned to Lawrence. *"But we cannot dream forever."*

What you have done was not wrong.

That was what Holo was saying.

Lawrence decided to believe her.

He brushed the fallen leaves off his clothes, looked to the ground, and caught a glimpse of the glittering girl engraved on the disk.

She was smiling happily, just like an angel.

When Lawrence told Elsa a summary of the device and how it worked, Elsa looked at her glasses, then hurriedly moved them away from the candlelight, slightly frightened.

After solving the mystery of the angel on the mountain, the despondent Tanya let out a flood of her memories with the alchemist, and they listened as she talked and talked. Then, once the sun set, they returned to the church.

When they did, it was not just Lawrence on Holo's back but Tanya as well.

Elsa's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of the massive squirrel, but she did have a lot of experience. "Why don't we make some acorn bread?" she suggested, which immediately cheered Tanya up to a degree. Holo knew she should not stop them, but it was funny to see her so vexed by the considerate choice of food.

It was late at night, before the acorn bread was to be baked, when they strapped Elsa's memorandum about the price of the mountain and Lawrence's letter to Hilde around Holo's neck.

"Why not go when the bread is finished?" Elsa suggested, but Holo left, almost as though she was running away.

Holo was fast enough to even reach Nyohhira, which they had departed quite a while ago, and make the return trip in a single night.

The existence of that metal disk would certainly be something worth a thousand gold or more to Hilde, who operated many mines, so there was no doubt that he would offer a high price for both that and the mountain.

The thought did cross Lawrence's mind that there was perhaps a slight chance that Hilde was already aware of technology similar to the disk, but his worries were quickly dispelled by Tanya's own words.

Whatever happened to the mountain, she would always be there. The top apprentice, the one carved into the disk, may one day return along with her memories of the master.

In response, Holo assured them that she would make that rabbit pay up, even if she had to resort to her fangs. Lawrence could see her doing that, but in his letter, he had written, *Please let me know if Holo tries to compel you in any way.*

Holo, entrusted with the letter, filled with all sorts of thoughts and feelings, vanished into the dark of the night in the blink of an eye.

Seeing her off, Lawrence heaved a tired sigh and looked to the sky.

Their story, made into a painting as myth, was still ongoing.

"Mr. Lawrence, the bread is ready!"

Tanya, who helped bake the bread while in her human form, called out to him, pulling Lawrence's gaze back from the sky.

He turned around, and there was Tanya, her physique marvelous in a different way from Holo's, waving to him.

Lawrence waved back and murmured to himself, "Maybe I should eat all the bread, just to show how much I love my wife."

Acorn bread was bitter and hard.

Just like the tales people unknowingly left behind in this world.

No, maybe I should leave at least one loaf for Holo, Lawrence thought with a quiet smile.

TAIL
R ONDO
AND
WOLF



TAIL RONDO AND WOLF

Late that night, Lawrence suddenly awoke in a chill. Half-asleep, he pulled the blanket up to his shoulders and began to search around inside of it—something was missing. There should have been some fluffy fur of a very different make than the blanket.

What's more, it was the genuine fur of a living creature that emanated its own body heat, and there was nothing warmer than pulling both the fur and its owner deep into his arms. The only flaw was the fact that the fur's owner was a terrible sleeper, but so long as she did not headbutt him, Lawrence was confident he could sleep soundly until morning, even in the dead of winter.

No matter how long he groped around in the dark, however, he could not find what he was looking for in the blanket. Had she gone to drink some water outside, he wondered, cracking his eyes open, and that was when he realized what it was.

Holo had left the night three days prior.

With nowhere for his hands to go, he placed them on his chest. From the gaps in the windows, the moonlight streamed onto the ceiling, drawing streaks like a beast's claw marks. Dawn was still far off.

He rubbed his face with his hands and let out a small sigh.

That first night had been so much easier alone.

Ever since they left their bathhouse in Nyohhira to go on a journey, Holo had steadily began to drink more and more alcohol, either because of the feeling of freedom traveling offered her or because she no longer had a need to act like a dignified adult before her daughter. She liked to let the buzz put her to sleep, so he constantly had to take care of this and that before going to bed himself. Of course, Lawrence did not hate these duties of his, and Holo probably was only partially pretending to be drunk, fully enjoying being pampered, but it was still a

hassle all the same.

That was why he thoroughly appreciated his first calm night in a long while with a sigh of relief.

On the second night, he found himself restless with nothing to do.

Lawrence was staying at the lodging quarters in the cathedral of the Vallan Bishopric. The one looking after the place was a female priest who was an old acquaintance of his named Elsa, and she was not the sort to while away the long hours of the night with drink and chatter. She would finish eating her simple dinner before sundown, offer a long prayer to God afterward, then soon hurry off to bed so as not to waste any candles. The one thing she said before bed was, *“May tomorrow be another quiet day.”*

Holo was the exact opposite—she cherished feasts and any opportunity she had to drink. *“We traveled a lot today, so let us drink; absolutely nothing happened today, so let us drink; and we cannot let the day end so early, so let us keep the candles lit.”*

Even before she let her tipsiness lull her into sleep, she would often mumble about what might be on the menu for the following day’s breakfast.

It was normal for him to spend nights with her like that, so to be sent to bed so early left him feeling restless and idle, as though he still had things to take care of and energy to spare. Though he eventually caved and took out the drink, it felt strange to have it by himself, so he gave up on that as well and had no choice but to simply sleep early.

On the third night, Tanya came down from the mountain. She was the embodiment of a squirrel who took on an important role in the myth of the angel of the cursed mountain, passed down through the Vallan Bishopric. It was only a few days ago that Lawrence both figured out the secret left behind in the mountain and solved the alchemists’ mystery; ever since, Tanya looked at him with glittering eyes, which embarrassed him a little.

The thing she had been focusing all her energy on these past few days was drafting up a plan that would establish the sites for timber cutting and charcoal burning on the old mining—and now “cursed”—mountain. Holo had left three days prior for exactly that same reason—she was delivering a letter that

proposed selling the mountain to their old acquaintances at the Debau Company. It would not take long for the mountain to go bare again if it simply reopened as a mine, so they proposed that the company buy the land primarily for timber and charcoal burning.

Tanya, who had spent many long years bringing greenery back to the barren mountain, was fervently drawing up a plan that would allow the greatest possible profit while keeping the mountain's lush foliage in place.

And so she feverishly begged Lawrence for answers to questions like what types of trees did she need to grow or what age tree sold for the most money. The girl, normally round as a ball when she was in her squirrel form, was mild mannered and as absentminded as she looked, but she could also be surprisingly tenacious and determined. Moreover, she regarded him as a hero, which he found to be incredibly moving as he offered her his thoughts.

She was entirely different from Holo, who would never remember the types of coins no matter how many times she was taught, who was smart but grew bored quickly, who enjoyed herself the most whenever she was mischievously play-biting him. And that was to say nothing when compared to his daughter, Myuri, who inherited a great deal of Holo's blood and boasted a youthful tomboyishness on top of that...With a sigh for what could've been, Lawrence readily counseled the passionate Tanya.

Since this had to do with the bishopric's assets, Elsa also joined in on the night of the third day, staying up late for the first time in a while, but when everything was done and they returned to their rooms, the silence and darkness felt that much heavier. Lawrence had not felt this way since his time as a traveling merchant. It felt the same as returning by himself to his empty room in an inn to prepare for the next day after participating in a festival that he happened upon by coincidence in a village on his peddling route.

Then the fourth day came.

During the day, he spent almost every waking moment with Tanya, who had spent the night prior, polishing the afforestation plans for the mountain, but once the sun set she returned to her beloved mountain, and Elsa went to sleep early as always. Lawrence, alone, knew it was tasteless, but he could not keep

himself from pulling out the alcohol.

He poured himself a little more than normal and took a sip, had a bite of his sausage, then helped himself to another sip. This repeated quickly as he had no one to talk to between drinks, and before long, he was quite inebriated. Once that came over him, he dove into bed as though he was leaping off the back of a galloping horse.

However, even with the influence of alcohol, he still could not get to sleep and ended up tossing and turning. Then, just as he thought he had finally managed to slip into slumber, he sobered up with a chill that startled him awake, which brings us to the present.

Lawrence did not want to acknowledge it.

He was lonely.

He could scarcely remember what life was like before he met Holo, and it was much too cold in the blanket despite it not being winter.

The Debau Company was certainly far, but Holo's legs could take her there in an instant, and he knew it was next to impossible for her to become lost or get in an accident or even fall prey to bandits.

In which case, she was either disputing the sale of the mountain at the company, or what was even more likely was that she had been greeted with a warm welcome at the main branch of the flourishing Debau Company and was extending her stay as long as possible. He could easily imagine her enjoying a bit of drink and meat.

Though he knew there was little he loved more than Holo enjoying herself, Lawrence nonetheless found himself spending cold nights here all alone. Something was slowly bubbling beneath the surface.

In his bed, he heaved a deep sigh, gave up on sleep, and sat himself up. Relying on the light of the moon that filtered through the gaps in the window, his eyes darted about, and the thick bundle of paper on the table caught his attention.

He got out from his bed and reached out for the paper, flipped through the first few pages, and in inimitable script, one he could not even say was good out

of flattery, was a record of what happened day to day.

It contained thoughts like, *The bread at breakfast was hard. There was not much meat in the porridge for lunch. The evening wine was sour.*

“This is all about food,” Lawrence murmured with a wry smile, reading through Holo’s diary. She had just listed a whole mountain of inconsequential items after another, but those were daily memories that would easily be forgotten when one spent their time normally and that was exactly what Holo wanted to record, so she had written it in her diary.

What surprised him was how much he could recall when it was all written down like this.

He stood, flipping through the diary, and finally sighed as he brushed some of the writing. This was essentially medicine for the long-lived Holo, prepared on a daily basis for the day she would inevitably have to part with him.

Of course, Lawrence thought he had grasped what that meant. But now that he was left by himself in this room, for the first time he truly felt and understood a taste of what it was that Holo would have to battle with in the years to come.

He had only been apart from her for a few days, and he was already a mess. And that was despite believing that in the near future, she would be coming back to him.

But what if this was an eternal parting? If they would never see each other again?

Lawrence took a slow, deep breath and shook his head. That would be pain he could scarcely even imagine. That was what was waiting for Holo.

There were only so many things he could do, but he could at least let this diary grow thick and let her have as much as she asked for—as much as he could possibly give her...That was what occurred to him at first, but those feelings slowly deflated.

That was because as he read through her writing, as though he was chasing her tail, he found nothing but complaints like, *Lawrence did not buy that for me; he did not do this for me; he is inconsiderate; he snores too loud*, despite how

much he took care of her.

“I feel like I might be spoiling her too much, just like Miss Elsa said...”

Lawrence flipped through and looked at her most recent entry, the one she wrote the night before she left. All it said was, *There most certainly will be loads of delicious drink.*

Suspicion toward Holo and her late return reared its head again.

The Debau Company was a massive conglomerate that held incredible sway over the northlands, and they had control over a good portion of trade. She was certainly not wrong to expect them to offer a near endless array of delicious treats, and her hard work for delivering the letter was deserving of praise, no question.

But to Lawrence, who was left sipping on flavorless drink, it felt somewhat unfair.

He sulked, imagining Holo enjoying herself without him.

“Hmm?”

A shadow suddenly passed over the moonlight outside. If it was a cloud, then it was strange that there still seemed to be light filtering in through a different window.

He wondered what it was and opened the wooden shutters; the reason he did not give out a cry was not because he had iron nerves.

It was because the sight that greeted him was so far removed from reality.

“What, you are awake at this time of night? Too lonely to sleep?”

Under the moonlight, a massive wolf gave a mischievous grin.

Though his lodgings were on the second floor, the window was right at the height of Holo’s nose in her wolf form.

Lawrence stood still without saying a word, wondering if it must be a dream, when Holo’s tail swished back and forth before she stuck her nose into the window.

She sniffed, and this time pressed her large eye up to the window.

“You have been getting along quite well with that squirrel, no?”

The large eyeball, too big to fit into Lawrence’s arms, glared at him.

Holo’s red eyes could spot even the most minute twitch of her prey, and her wolf ears could pierce through any lie.

Even if it was a dream, Lawrence was so happy to see Holo that his face almost broke out into a smile on reflex, but he resisted mightily, took a deep breath, and responded, “We had to talk about a great deal concerning the mountain.”

“And yet, you have been close enough for her smell to cling to you like this—what were you scheming?”

Tanya was mild mannered and sociable, which made her wholly unlike Holo and the pessimistic air she normally projected.

He would not deny that they had been in close contact, but Holo’s suspicions of adultery were unfounded.

First, Lawrence also had something to say.

“If you were so worried about your prey, then why not come back a little earlier?”

Holo blinked, surprised to be met with a counterattack, then wrinkled her nose.

“Fool. How many miles do you think I have covered at full speed?”

She growled from the other side of the window.

“You smell a lot like alcohol for someone who’s supposedly been running this whole time.”

Despite how her whole face was covered in fur when she was in her wolf form, her expressions were surprisingly easy for him to read.

She turned away, as though trying to gloss over that, so Lawrence could tell right away she had certainly drank her fill and perhaps a little more at the Debau Company.

She did not seem drunk, of course, so she had likely only sampled enough for

the smell to stick to her fur.

"You fool. The rabbit simply knows how to pay his respects to the wisewolf," Holo said, then stuck her neck against the window frame. Her rough hairs poked into the room, and there he spotted something wrapped around her neck.

"I feel I've been infested with fleas and am uneasy. Hurry and take it."

Lawrence took the letters strapped to her fur and smoothed out the kinks they had left with his hand.

Like a fawning dog, Holo pushed her neck back up against him, but the walls started making an ominous creaking sound, so he pushed her away.

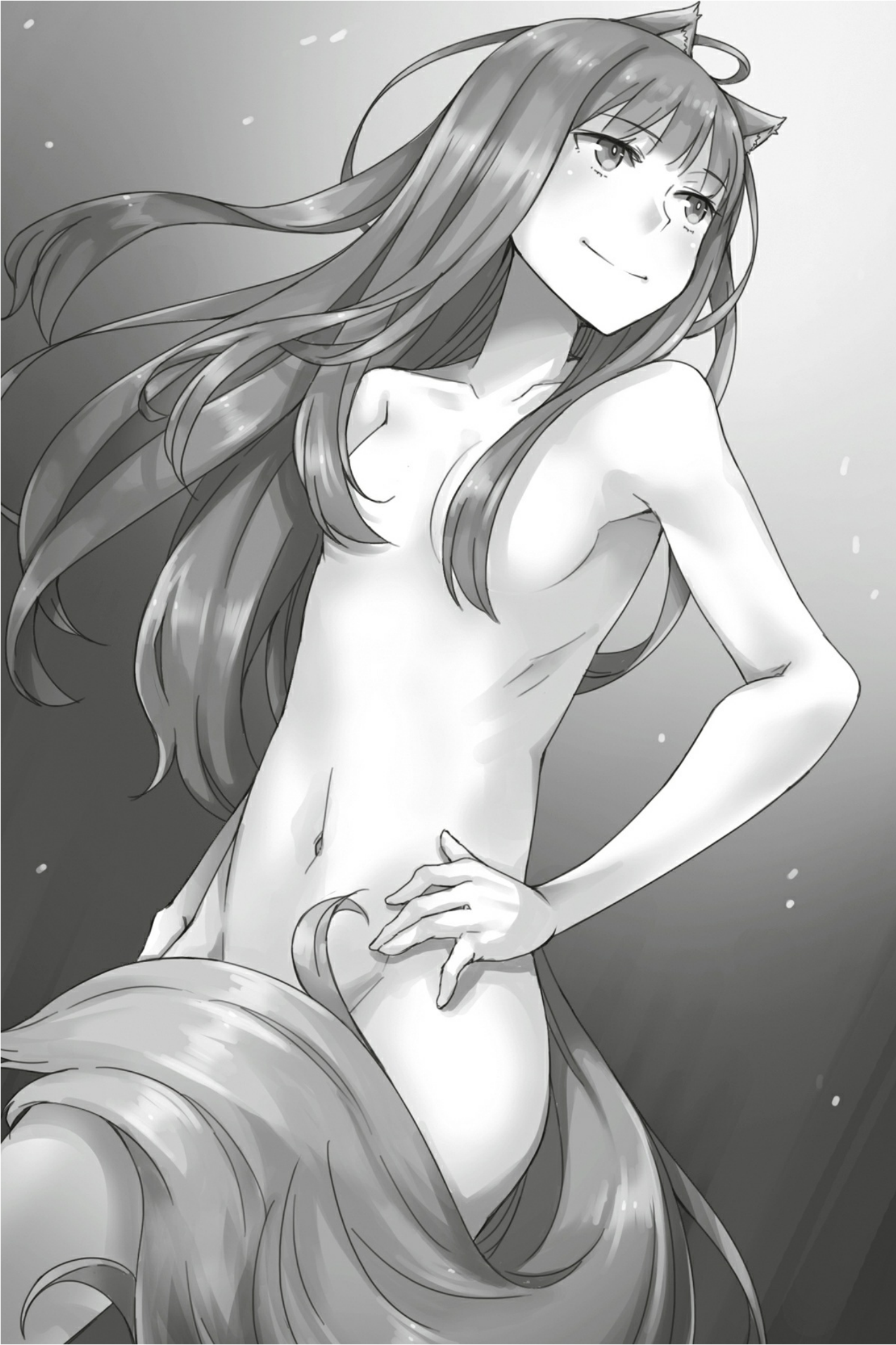
"Sheesh."

Holo stepped back and grinned; then after a big twirl of her tail, she vanished.

For a moment, he almost feared it was all a flash of a dream, but then he found the letters remained in his hands. He poked his head out of the window and looked down to see Holo, now in her human form, standing beneath him.

She of course wore no clothes, her pearl-like skin glowing under the moonlight. Her hair, more delicate than the finest silk, swayed gently behind her. She looked just like a spirit of the moon as she quietly peered up at the white orb hanging in the heavens.

Right as Lawrence found himself enchanted by her mystique, the beautiful wolf girl gave a loud sneeze like an old man. It didn't do the mood any favors, but that was a part of what made Holo, Holo.



With a wry smile, Lawrence grabbed the coat draped over the back of the chair, balled it up, and tossed it down to her.

“Hurry and come on up. You’ll get sick.”

Holo deftly caught the coat, whipped it open, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She then gathered it in front of her face and inhaled deeply.

“Heh. It smells like you.”

Her reddish eyes smiled in delight.

Lawrence wanted to say something, but he fell silent instead.

How he felt about Holo could not be expressed in a single word.

And so he rubbed his nose and simply said, “Welcome back.”

Holo’s eyes widened blankly for a moment before she smiled gleefully.

“Aye.”

What, no “I’m back”? Lawrence smiled in exasperation, and Holo lifted her chin in a dignified manner and walked off.

He watched her tail poking out from beneath the coat, and just as she vanished around the corner of the building, he went to close the window when his gaze drifted upward.

Though the moon was not full, it still shone brilliantly.

Lawrence reverently bowed his head to the moon before pulling the window shut with both hands.

It was right afterward that Holo gracefully stepped into the room, and Lawrence pulled her into a tight hug.

The following morning, Lawrence woke up and enjoyed Holo’s sleeping face for a while before gently waking her, respectfully presenting her a meal of cheese and sausage stuck into some bread, and while the princess sat on the bed, kicking her feet and stuffing her face with the bread, he cared for her tail.

Though Holo was normally quite content to let Lawrence handle all the hard

work, it was only when she was in a good mood that she allowed him to take care of her tail. Even having him wipe the crumbs that stuck to the corners of her mouth after they were finished eating was part of their usual ritual.

The morning sun bathed Holo in warm light as she smiled blissfully and kissed Lawrence on the cheek.

“My own household feels like it’s in discord when I watch you two,” Elsa said in exasperation when she saw Lawrence and Holo emerge from the lodgings, hand in hand, while she went around watering the herbs growing on the cathedral grounds.

“’Tis a difference in dignity,” Holo boldly claimed, and it seemed that even Elsa could not help but smile.

“How did things go?”

“I don’t think the price was all that terrible.”

Lawrence presented the letters that Holo brought back from the Debau Company, but Elsa’s hands were soiled from her fieldwork. Lawrence took the letters back, and Elsa looked around at the herb garden.

“I’m just finished watering the garden, so why don’t we look over the letters as we eat breakfast? Or have you already eaten?”

“Oh, in that case—”

“Aye, a splendid idea.”

Since Holo had cut Lawrence’s reply off with her own words, Elsa seemed to get a general idea of what was going on.

“I will praise you for not outright lying with a claim that you had yet to eat at all.”

After washing her hands with water reserved in the nearby wooden pail, Elsa pulled out a cloth from her waist to dry them with a practiced motion, then tossed out the rest of the water and held the pail under her arm with the rest of her gardening tools.

“God commends hospitality, after all.”

Holo wagged her tail, and Lawrence went to help bring some of Elsa's tools inside.

What Elsa brought out along with freshly boiled goat's milk was a type of hard-baked bread that Lawrence had told Elsa's village about and was still a specialty there—cookies.

"Mmm, this has a lovely texture."

Holo made *crunch, crunch* sounds as she ate. Soft and flaky cookies were generally popular, but the harder ones had been growing in popularity recently. Lawrence also suspected that the reason Elsa expressly offered the harder type was because watching Holo eat them reminded her of a dog chewing on bones. Meanwhile, he soaked his cookies in milk before having some. Lawrence was surprised—for someone who always preached simplicity and frugality, Elsa had certainly splurged on something that used butter, salt, eggs, and most luxuriously, sugar.

"This Mr. Hilde is the one I met at your wedding, isn't he?" Elsa remarked as she unfolded the letter addressed to her.

It had been a lively wedding, where Lawrence and Holo managed to invite most everyone they had met along their journey.

"Yes, the rabbit avatar."

Elsa nodded, then turned to look at Holo, who was gleefully munching on the hard cookie.

"Are you certain you did not threaten him?"

Holo's ears perked up, then she turned a grumpy eye to Elsa.

"Fool. I have done no such thing. Well, perhaps the rabbit felt intimidated by my majesty of his own accord."

She puffed out her chest in pride, but Hilde was not that fragile, and Holo knew that as well.

"He *did* ask me an exhausting amount of questions about the state of the mountain and wanted to know every little detail about the angel gate on top of that. He made me speak so much that it was a pain just keeping my throat

quenched.”

Though Holo may have occupied herself by drinking as much as she talked, Hilde and his cohorts had done careful calculations on the value of both the mountain and the angel gate and offered them a price.

Additionally, the angel gate was a tool created by the alchemists and their technological prowess—a metallic mirror that could concentrate sunlight to create incredible heat. It was relatively common knowledge that glass treasures meant for making text larger and clearer could sometimes cause things to catch fire, but Lawrence had no idea that it was possible to create one that could produce enough heat to refine metal by simply hammering out a sheet of metal plate to a precise degree.

Much like how a wolf could become a god if it were big enough, once the mundane crossed a certain threshold in size and scale, it transformed into something wholly unknown and alien.

“So this means our result includes all sorts of things.”

Elsa, the ideal priestess who was endowed with both education and faith, nodded quietly.

“I don’t think it’s all that bad of a price. Timber prices may be going up, I doubt they will go down that easily, so I believe the price of the mountain will hold its value for at least a while.”

“All that’s left is to guarantee Tanya’s identity here.”

Even if they did manage to sell the mountain to the Debau Company, the ones who would be actually working there would be a good number of locals. Their only knowledge of nonhumans was in the realm of fairy tales and myths, so of course revealing Tanya’s true form as a squirrel avatar to them was not an option. In order for Tanya to work well with them, they would have to arrange a plan that would allow her to conform to the human world.

On that point, the Church, who managed people’s lives from birth to the grave, could easily create an identity for a new villager out of thin air.

“I’m glad this has reached an excellent conclusion.”

Elsa placed the letters down, then looked to Lawrence and smiled with relief. Her smile was stern, but there was also a kindness to it. When she was younger, Elsa only ever showed the stern part of her; it seemed she was aging quite gracefully.

“Though it is now that things will grow troublesome.”

It was Holo who interjected, baring her fangs to threaten Lawrence as he reached for the last cookie in the wooden bowl.

“Troublesome? Why is that?”

Holo, her cheeks stuffed with the last cookie, licked her fingers in pure delight before answering.

“I will again have to take the response to that letter and head north, no? And that is quite the sum of money written there. I travel everywhere with this fool, you see. I can generally imagine how many coins that would be. If such an amount must be carried so far away, then who is it who will be taking on that role?”

Evidently already fed up with the prospect, Holo leaned back in her chair with a look that suggested she could not be bothered.

Elsa blinked, then looked to Lawrence.

Holo noticed their looks and stared hard at the both of them.

“What is that face supposed to mean?”

After a moment of worried thought, Elsa slid a piece of parchment from her side over the long table toward Lawrence, as though telling him to take care of it. With no other choice, Lawrence took the sheet and responded.

“There won’t be any need for you to carry a mound of coins on your back.”

Holo raised an eyebrow.

“Then what? Will you line up carts and fill the beds with mountains of coin?”

“We don’t have to do that, and you don’t have to send a response to the letter, either. Mr. Hilde trusts us.”

“...Hrm?”

“Even though he’s buying a mountain in a faraway place that he’s never seen for such a high price, he paid us without a second thought. He sure is the paragon of a great merchant, isn’t he?”

“What is this?”

Holo had her brows drawn together grumpily, and Lawrence said, “It’s a money order. You must’ve seen some a couple of times back when we traveled together.”

“?”

“This single piece of paper is used in the stead of massive amounts of coin.”

Holo’s eyes widened slightly, then looked at the money order with a grouchy expression.

“...Your typical magic, then.”

“I’m reluctant to talk about magic in front of Miss Elsa.”

Elsa, of course, did not deign to engage with each and every joking remark. In this case, she contented herself with elegantly sipping her goat’s milk.

“Like you said, carrying money is a hassle, and it can be dangerous, too. So instead, Mr. Hilde signed this piece of paper, which guarantees us the amount written here. And so just by taking this piece of paper to the appropriate company, we can withdraw the amount of money that’s written here. Incredible, isn’t it?”

It was the merchants’ chain of trust. The currency called *trust* circulated between distant, sometimes wholly unrelated companies along the latticework that was mutual trade. A simple piece of paper did the job of a pile of shiny gold coins.

The reason why misers who hoarded mountains of coin in their houses were considered the symbol of mean-spirited folk who trusted no one had been illustrated right here.

Those who earned trust and put their trust in others had no need to hide their gold in the floorboards.

“Of course, what makes it greater than magic is how Mr. Hilde, with all the

trust he has at his fingertips, is so bighearted as a merchant.”

The Debau Company was a massive corporation that effectively reigned over the northlands, and they even had their own currency.

Lawrence even felt pride in the good luck that led them to meeting Hilde.

Holo the wolf, however, apparently found Lawrence’s praise of Hilde the rabbit unpleasant, so she seemed rather displeased.

“And so, unfortunately, you’ve lost your excuse to binge drink at the Debau Company.”

When Lawrence said that, Holo pursed her lips while the hair on her ears and tail stood on end.

“Fool!”

Then again, she did make a disappointed face, so perhaps she had actually been looking forward to that.

She sure is greedy. Lawrence smiled as he tried his best to console her. “No need to be upset. Either way, the talks are settled. It might be time for us to leave and head on to the next town, right?”

Holo squished Lawrence’s foot under the long table and stared at him with doubt.

“Don’t you want to drop by the grand market on the other side of the mountain? I’m still worried about Col and Myuri, but...Well, we can’t come all this way and not see the fair, right?”

Holo’s wolf ears nimbly flicked twice; then she stopped squishing his foot and immediately broke into a smile.

How calculating of her, Lawrence thought with exasperation when Elsa spoke up.

“In that case, may I make a request?” The typically calm Elsa neatly folded Hilde’s letter and boldly asked, “Could you take me along with you?”

This took Lawrence by surprise because as far as he knew, Elsa was supposed to be watching over the church while everyone else was away. More to the

point, he simply could not imagine her casually shopping at a market.

Elsa then sighed and placed a hand to her right cheek, almost as though her tooth hurt.

“It turns out that some people from this church and village have gotten wrapped up in some trouble at the grand market. A letter requesting help arrived yesterday, and I wasn’t so sure what to do...But now I am certain this is God’s will. It would be most reassuring if you allowed me to join you on the road.” Elsa spoke in an almost deliberately priestly manner as she gazed at Lawrence and Holo.

What made her such a first-class priest was how she so deftly saddled others with a strong sense of responsibility.

Elsa knew exactly what her role was.

Lawrence found the clear solution comforting, so he responded with a smile.

“If you’re okay with us, then we’ll help you.”

Elsa was convinced that she would get a response like that and likely brought it up right at this moment precisely because of that.

Holo turned to Lawrence with an expression that suggested she found it all bothersome, but she said nothing.

She of course seemed to understand that the sweet and wonderfully crunchy cookies that had been brought to the table were the opening jab meant to make her more pliable before driving home this request. Holo could hardly protest as the culprit who had devoured every last morsel.

“What a great help. May God guide you.”

That is what Elsa said, even though Holo could certainly live a healthy and powerful life without God’s guidance.

When Elsa explained the situation to them, it sounded like the typical circumstances of most who paid the grand market a visit.

The residents of the Vallan Bishopric needed to sell their autumn harvest at the fair; they then used the proceeds to buy supplies that would last until next spring. While it sounded like this was a regular occurrence, the company that

acted as their trade representative every year had apparently found itself in dire straits.

If this company were to go bankrupt, then the villagers would not be able to get any money from the sale of their crops, nor would they have a chance to obtain any of the goods needed to face the coming winter. If that happened, grave problems might arise in poor households that did not have any reserves to spare. Thus, the request to bring a catalog of the church's assets to the fair posthaste.

As expected of Elsa, she did not panic in the face of an unexpected dilemma and try to leave it all in Lawrence's hands.

"To either save a weakened animal or abandon it to better your own chances of survival—that fool certainly knows better than I first assumed."

As they packed up their things in their room, Holo remarked, impressed.

Elsa's conversation with Lawrence had not been to seek advice on what she should do.

In their possession was the money order, which represented the full value of the mountain they had sold. With it, they could help turn around the company's financial situation and possibly help them out of a tough spot. That said, they had no way of knowing if that could be accomplished. In fact, it was entirely plausible that even after pouring in all the money they received from the land sale, the company might still turn out to be unsavable in the end.

On the other hand, if they ignored the company's plight and used the money order for the people of the bishopric, they would undoubtedly be able to purchase a few years' worth of goods.

In a situation like this, there was likely nobody besides God who could save both the company and the people of the bishopric without fail.

Elsa understood that the number of things that strength and compassion could accomplish were limited.

That was why she asked Lawrence to get a clear idea on the company's current situation, since she would be making the final decision.

From a long-term perspective, helping the company would indebt them to the villagers, which would benefit the residents of the bishopric. However, if they were to prioritize certainty, then they should spend the sale's proceeds on the people themselves. Elsa tackled the choice realistically and needed an objective source of information. Lawrence thought that Holo might be angry that her companion was being pushed about like this, but she seemed to appreciate Elsa's way of thinking.

Holo had once been revered as a god long ago, so she likely had been pressured to make similar decisions many times over the years.

"But from what I hear about the company, it sounds less like they failed at business and more like some other reason."

As Lawrence put all their things together, he handed his wife her diary. Holo, who seemed as though she would refuse to carry anything heavier than bread, made a sole exception for that diary and carefully tucked it away.

"Can they go under from anything besides failing at trade?"

"There are lots of reasons a company might be forced to close shop."

"Oh?"

Holo seemed to have no intentions to help pack as she sat cross-legged on the bed, opening her diary and taking a quill in hand. She must have wanted to write down Lawrence's explanation if it proved to be interesting.

He was not going to start complaining after all this time, so he continued without remark.

"The first case is they just took on too many losses. There's also the possibility there's discord within the company itself, leaving them unable to do business. Or it could be an issue where the permits necessary to do trade are taken away and they can't work at all."

Holo stroked her chin with the feather on the quill. Apparently, none of this was interesting enough to deserve a spot in her diary.

"It could also be a case where they make enough money and steady profits but still end up going bankrupt."

Holo's ears perked up. That seemed to stir her curiosity.

"How so? A shop making money would not shut down."

"You'd think so, right? But in trade, it's normal for there to be a gap in time between paying and receiving money. If it turns out that you'll get the money from selling something next week, even though you need the coin to buy something now, there will be a time when the reserves are empty. If your coffers are empty right when important bills come up one after another and time runs out, that can be it."

Lawrence pulled the hemp sack shut, like he was snuffing the life out of it.

"Being unable to keep promises is fatal for a merchant. End of the road."

Holo sat cross-legged, hunched over, and wore a hard expression. She did not quite seem to buy this.

"But they are making profits, no? I still do not understand."

"On paper, they are. That's why they call money not received for a sold product *accounts receivable* or *credit*, but if they can get all of what they 'lend' back, then they can pay back everything they 'borrowed.' You follow so far?"

"Hrm...aye."

"Every company has more lent out than borrowed. Basically, they're making money. But like I said before, since there's a gap in time between when money is paid and when it's received, they need to be careful that the reserves don't go empty in the meantime. Someone in the company is supposed to be aware of all the transactions and regulates the timing very carefully so money doesn't run out, but sudden accidents and mistakes can happen at any time. Like something you did because you thought it nice enough at the time, but it only ends up souring the mood of a selfish princess or something, you know," Lawrence explained, and Holo nodded with an I-know-how-it-is look that said, "Indeed, exactly like that fool Myuri."

Lawrence smiled, opting not to point out the other obvious interpretation, and continued. "So the problem in an emergency is that from the outside, it's hard to tell if the company's lending and borrowing actually do balance out. What they have written in their account books is nothing but text in the end,

and it's not realistic to investigate every single thread."

"Mm-hmm...That is certainly true. And?"

Holo was listening to Lawrence with what had to be keen interest, and that made him happy.

"A company has to be trusted if they intend to last. However, in order to prove that they're making money and doing fine, it's critical to make their payments on time every day. That's why it's so bad if a pay deadline comes up and there's no money in the bank. If they can't make their payment, then trust in them as an organization will plummet. Other people will think, *Well, that's no good*, and stop selling them any products, which will delay transactions. That in turn will make payment more and more difficult, and trade will grind to a complete halt. Like a heart stopping." Lawrence took Holo's jacket, which was slung over the back of the chair, and tossed it to her. "Basically, it's like a princess who's always had everything paid for her entire life but never said thanks, and everyone else's compassion for her eventually running out."

"Wha—? Hey!"

"Of course, even if you figured you were going to eventually pay your debts back, that's only in the account books in your mind. I never get rewarded, so my heart goes bankrupt. Good lesson, right?"

Lawrence smiled, and Holo drew up her shoulders and pouted before baring her fangs.

"You fool! I am the one with more lent out!"

"Sure, sure."

Lawrence casually brushed off the indignant Holo and hauled their things onto his back.

"Trade in reality is a lot like you and me right now. Except there's far more people involved. Imagine ten of me and ten of you, all living under the same roof, arguing about who owes what to whom. You can imagine something will inevitably get out of hand one day, right?"

"..."

Holo must have already pictured the situation, because though she flicked her tail with irregularity like a nervous cat, she did not argue with him. That was because even with just the two of them, they would argue over whether there was too much or too little jerky for dinner.

“Well, whatever the reason, it would be nice if we could help the company, but I don’t know...Miss Elsa herself doesn’t seem to have much hope, but that actually helps keep us focused. It really is fantastic how she is so pious but realistic at the same time.”

“Hmph.”

It was as though Holo was saying, *That matters not*, as she stepped off the bed and slung her coat over her shoulders, and Lawrence did the tie on her chest. Holo gave no thanks and wore a calm, distant expression, but her tail was clearly happy. That was Lawrence’s one weakness, which was why he always wanted to take care of her.

Holo did not often pay back what she owed, but she did pay a lot of interest.

“There is something strange about what you just said, however,” Holo said after she fiddled with the string tied in a bow at her chest. “Should that company go under, what would happen to all the loans they had given out? Do they disappear like smoke? Where would the money the folks here are supposed to receive from that company, for example, go?”

“They don’t call you the wisewolf for nothing, huh?” Lawrence rustled Holo’s hair, and she growled at him, baring a fang for having been treated like a child. “Even if a company goes under, that doesn’t mean all their assets and debts vanish into thin air. It’s likely some valuables will still be left in their reserves. That’s why there’s actually a much better way to secure money for the people of the bishopric.”

Holo noticed Lawrence’s change in tone of voice, and her wolf ears perked up again.

“The most selfish thing to do would be to push the company to the point of bankruptcy instead of lending a helping hand, then recover as much of the money owed as possible. Force it out of them like, *Who cares what happens to you?* And if all that was recovered, then they would still have everything from

this year's harvest without even having to touch the money from the mountain sale. Isn't that fantastic?" Lawrence then deliberately flashed his stereotypically cold merchant's smile. "If the company didn't have enough assets left to its name, then not everyone could take back what they lent out. It's first come, first served. If they take their time, then all that'd be left are the bones that everyone else has already picked over."

"...That does not sound very tasteful."

Holo, letting go of Lawrence's hands and placing her diary under her arm, peered back up at him.

There was something close to fear in her eyes. Just like how humans feared the animals in the forests, the animals of the forests, too, feared humans at times.

"Exactly. And what makes it even more complex is that a weakened sheep can actually get better in the future with appropriate treatment."

Holo stared blankly at him.

"If it gets better, then it can make wool and milk and bring profits for a very long time, right? Then everyone that's lending money to the sheep should be able to get all their returns back someday. Basically, if you look at things in the long term, then you can't really say that simply tearing into the vulnerable creature and plucking the meat off is always the wisest choice."

Lawrence looked to Holo with a joking smile—*You should remember this logic, right?*—but Holo only shot him a frown.

"You should only produce silver from your wallet a bit at a time, no? 'Twould all be for naught if you were to lose the seed money for your next venture."

Holo's selfishness was well-thought-out selfishness.

"Yes, that's right. And so Miss Elsa has this injured sheep in front of her and is trying to gather information so she can decide what to do. But that is not the amazing part. What's most impressive is how she understands that whatever choice she takes will absolutely leave traces of blood somewhere."

Holo stared at Lawrence, looking at him like a wolf in the wood checking to

see how its prey moved.

Then she sighed.

“That fool is not only strict with us but herself as well.”

“No doubt. To be honest, making a decision in a situation like this is the role of the villain. Miss Elsa understands that she’s been saddled with an ugly job, and that it’s the job of an outsider to do that. That’s why she’s not leaving the work to just us two but coming along to the market with us.”

Holo wrinkled her small, shapely nose.

“Sounds like the sort of thing you like.”

“There are people who steel themselves and seek to take on the villain’s role. It means they want to help out.”

“You are too softhearted,” Holo’s stare seemed to say, but she took his hand with a firm grasp.

Though she tended to find things bothersome, Holo herself was softhearted, so Lawrence often felt compelled to stick his nose into trouble and help out. But Lawrence acted to help someone out because he also felt pride as a member of the same flock. It was still a bother, though. And not only that, but Elsa was a woman.

Lawrence figured that must be a close enough reason and looked to the grimacing Holo.

“Come on—cheer up.”

Lawrence lifted his hand, still intertwined with Holo’s, and gently brushed the back of his fingers against her cheek.

Holo narrowed her eyes in slight annoyance.

“You’ll get to see me in action and admire how good I’ll look while doing it.”

Holo stared blankly at what he said next, then gave a wry, exasperated smile.

“Hmm. Think of all the encouragement I shall need to give you when things do not go well and how much consolation you will cry for when you fail.”

She was lightly tapping him with the tip of her tail.

That was the great wisewolf's compassion.

Lawrence stroked Holo's cheek with the back of his fingers one more time before leaving the room.

Elsa asked a trustworthy villager to look after the church and joined Lawrence and Holo on the trek to the grand market. Since Elsa could not ride a horse and the mountain roads were wide enough to fit a horse and cart, they decided to travel by cart.

The cart bed was messy with things like the sulfur they had brought from Nyohhira, but it did not seem to pose any trouble with Elsa on her own.

That was what Lawrence had thought, but the atmosphere that hung over the cart took a slight turn for the weird.

To be precise, it was Holo, riding in the cart bed along with Elsa, who was acting strange.

The two were exact opposites, and Holo was acutely conscious of it in one way or another. And so that was why if Elsa sat alone in the back, Holo would grow restless, thinking about what was behind her. But at the same time, the option of Elsa sitting on the driver's perch alongside Lawrence was out of the question, and it would be even weirder to let Elsa take the reins so that Lawrence and Holo could sit together in the cart bed.

In the end, Holo decided to sit with Elsa in the cart bed, but they were not of course having any sort of pleasant chats. They sat diagonally across from each other, creating the biggest space between them possible, and while Elsa paid Holo absolutely no mind, the hairs on Holo's tail stood on end.

While she most likely did not hate Elsa, she did consider the cart as her territory. Moreover, Elsa was not someone who could be dismissed as an insignificant opponent, so her presence weighed on Holo's mind all the more for it.

Though Lawrence tended to forget, Holo was a wolf at heart.

That being said, Holo herself couldn't exactly control how strong her territorial instinct was, so he refrained from poking fun at her. He knew from his years of experience that she would get genuinely angry.

With that tense air persisting, the cart entered the mountain in short order, passing through a road that was in the midst of transitioning from autumn to winter. Lawrence enjoyed the sound of leaves crunching beneath the wheels as they made their way forward.

When they stopped the cart for lunch along the way, Elsa took the meal as an opportunity to explain the workings of the grand market.

The fair was east from the Vallan Bishopric in the plains on the other side of the mountains in a city called Salonia. The event reportedly took place twice a year, in spring and autumn. The grand market in the spring was as lively as fish leaping out of a lake, while the autumn one was as chaotic as pigs digging for acorns in a forest.



She had heard that from the people of the Vallan Bishopric, and she seemed to like those metaphors quite a bit.

Lawrence, who had made a living as a traveling merchant, knew how fun and difficult the chaos could be, so a vague smile crossed his face. On top of that, the moment Holo went to a fair like that, she would certainly pester him to buy her this and that.

The thought crossed his mind, but he then realized that Holo was nowhere to be seen. She had been oddly quiet during their meal, perhaps because she had become tired of making a fuss about nothing, so maybe she was off moping.

Just as Lawrence was halfway through standing, figuring he should go look for her, Holo came back. When he asked, she told him that she had carved a letter to Tanya in a tree just off the road.

When Elsa mentioned that she had similarly informed the villager she had left in charge of the cathedral about their departure, Holo responded that though the mountain Tanya based herself on was far, she would most certainly notice that they were passing through this mountain. More importantly, she had already experienced the pain of waiting for such a long time, alone, for the alchemists she had parted with. If Tanya learned they had gone over the mountain to somewhere else without further explanation, she would most certainly fall apart.

It was the moment Lawrence thought about how it was odd for her to read so much into something. Holo sat on the dried leaves, about half a foot farther away from Lawrence than she usually did, likely because she was anxious about Elsa, then hunched over and rested her chin on her raised knees. Though they did not sit shoulder to shoulder, she curled her tail around Lawrence's back.

Holo herself feared that someone who was nothing short of a good friend might leave.

Though she never aged and looked exactly like her daughter, Myuri, there was a difference in standing posture between mother and daughter that was difficult to describe. The reason for that was likely because the emotions Holo kept bottled up on the inside seeped out like this from time to time.

Lawrence was weak to Holo's childish conduct because he recognized it was partly an act she needed to cover the shards of darkness she kept hidden away. Holo knew that the music would one day stop, which was why she extended her hand to ask him to dance.

Lawrence could not bear to ignore what hid beneath her innocence.

There was the foolish Holo, the one who agonized over where in the cart Elsa should ride, and then there was the wisewolf Holo, the one who, after such a long time, had stored her sadness and hopes into the same box.

There was something worth risking his life over right here.

And so they finished their lunch break and once again set out on the cart when they finally crossed the ridge of the mountains and saw a large spread out in the distance. It was one of the keystones of inland trade, the city of Salonia.

"Mmm. I can almost smell the scent of wheat on the wind."

Holo's eyelids drooped, and she flashed one of her fangs. It seemed she had finally grown used to Elsa, perhaps a person she did not get on quite that well with, being in her territory of the cart.

"Endless bread and ale. Is that not the best?"

The wind blew away any caution regarding overeating that Elsa made.

Seeing Holo act like she always did, Lawrence smiled and tightened his grip on the reins.

The town of Salonia was not ringed by towering city walls, but there were dry moats and other earthworks around the perimeter, and they could see the church's bell tower peeking out from the center of the city. The layout of the city was organic and unplanned; the plazas that dotted the place were likely carried over from the days when this was a simple bartering spot for the nearby farming villages. Now it was piled high with agricultural produce, a lively location for trade.

It seemed that each plaza had a designated product. They could already see well-dressed merchants settling deals and hear the friendly chatter of traders who likely only saw one another once or twice a year.

Perhaps these naturally occurring gatherings were what eventually became the current biannual fair.

“The wheat they are trading here is subpar. There they have oats for horse feed. Hrm, over there is roasted barley. Brewing it would create a delightful drink!”

Holo had regained much of her usual cheer, perhaps because Elsa had alit from the cart as soon as they entered the city. She sniffed and immediately tugged on Lawrence’s sleeve in great excitement like a child.

“Miss Elsa, do you know the way to the inn where all the people of the bishopric are staying?”

In towns like this, once they reached the church at the center of the city, one could go anywhere. He turned the cart in that direction for the time being, but Elsa lightly shook her head at Lawrence’s question.

“I do not. This is my first time in this city as well. We will ask someone.”

Before she was even done speaking, she managed to grab a hold of a passerby, but everyone brushed off her question in a busy flurry.

The fifth man dressed in merchant’s clothes froze at the sight of Elsa, then rushed off.

“...May God guide him,” Elsa said, but she seemed rather unsettled by it.

“You have a scary face. Perhaps he was worried about being lectured,” Holo said with odd glee, so Lawrence poked her in the head.

“It makes sense. Everyone’s busy at this time of year.”

Elsa nodded vaguely as she gently placed a hand to her cheek. Perhaps the remark that her face was scary somewhat bothered her.

Lawrence poked Holo’s head again before catching the attention of a passing artisan’s apprentice from atop the driver’s perch. He sounded all grown up, telling them that he was too busy to respond, but he quickly told them the way once he had a silver coin in his hand.

The apprentice, too, kept glancing over at Elsa.

“Perhaps a female priest is just that unusual.”

Despite his remark, Lawrence knew that their reactions did not come from a place of curiosity at an unusual sight. Many travelers gathered here at the grand market, so there were people from every land and walk of life.

As he wondered what the real reason was, he prioritized meeting up with the villagers staying in the city for the time being.

They reached the inn the artisan’s apprentice told them about and found the tavern on the first floor packed with people. A good handful of people even sat on the ground just outside the inn, drinks in hand. It seemed a little shady at first, except it turned out they were not ruffians but merchants waiting to trade. Some of them immediately held their tongues and hid their drinks behind them when they saw Elsa.

Lawrence understood the reaction, because if a priest saw someone drinking during the day, they would certainly give them a scolding. They ducked their heads down to shrink themselves, and with a small sigh, Elsa simply said, “Be careful not to drink too much,” and continued past them.

But the reaction of those who saw her was noticeably strange. The inside of the tavern also suddenly went still, and a hard silence fell over the place. It seemed like people might even hesitate to cough.

When Holo and Lawrence saw the scene while still seated on the cart outside, they turned to look at each other.

“You were joking when you said her face was scary, right?”

“...You fool.”

Holo had been the one who made the joke earlier but even she seemed bewildered by all this.

They circled around to the back of the inn to drop off the cart before entering the building, only to find the merchants inside whispering quietly to one another. At the very back, Elsa was surrounded by several people.

“Miss Elsa,” Lawrence called, and everyone surrounding her turned to look at him.

There were three men dressed in plain clothes who seemed to be members of the clergy, while the other two were dressed in well-tailored outfits, but the lack of refinement made it clear they had come to the city as village representatives. All of them were a couple of decades older than Lawrence.

“Who are these gentlemen?”

“These are old acquaintances of mine, Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Each one accepted Lawrence’s extended hand with caution. One of them named himself the village’s head priest. He had forgotten after dealing with familiar guests all the time at the bathhouse, but whenever he traveled somewhere new in the past, this was the norm.

“First, let us guide you to the room.”

They headed up the stairs and ran into two of the younger villagers, perhaps left behind to watch the group’s belongings, though they were currently sitting in the hall outside of the room playing cards. They hurriedly put away their cards and led them through a large suite of rooms.

“The mood is not all that pleasant,” Elsa remarked, and the faces of all the elders clouded over in shame.

“Several of the villagers are on duty at the Laud Company, but it’s hard to say that the situation seems favorable in any way...”

“The entire city is full of life, but it only seems peaceful on the outside. Lady Elsa, did anyone say anything to you when you came into the city dressed like that?”

Lawrence was rather surprised to hear one of the clergymen use an honorific title with Elsa. Elsa often took up jobs she was requested to do, which was how she ended up in the Vallan Bishopric, so perhaps she had made an acquaintance in a high place along the way. The Church had its own unique hierarchy, so even though she was only a temporary priest, perhaps she had earned a fine name for herself as a woman of the cloth.

“Not particularly...But, well...” Elsa signaled to Lawrence with a glance so he

took over for her.

“Everyone seemed very surprised to see her in priest’s garb.”

One of the clergymen responded, “I thought as much. Someone got thrown in jail just the other day.”

“What?”

It was not just Elsa who was shocked but Lawrence, too. Even Holo, who had been lazily gazing out the window, was paying attention now.

“If they are so cautious of clerical robes then...was it an inquisitor?”

Holo finally seemed interested when Lawrence asked his question. To a nonhuman, inquisitors were their natural enemies.

“No, the one caught was a merchant. It’s someone we know well, someone who always conducted trade in good faith...”

“There were rumors a little while ago that it might end up like this, but because of that now, if you peel a layer back, you’ll see that all the city folk are on edge, like a wolf who’s been separated from the pack.”

Holo looked like she wanted to know exactly what that particular metaphor felt like in real life, so Lawrence gently touched her back to calm her down before saying, “Which means there are only so many reasons for this person’s arrest.”

He looked to Elsa, and the female priest, who was both knowledgeable in problems of faith and full of worldly wisdom, asked, “Was it debt?”

Not paying back a debt amounted to nothing more than betraying the trust of the person whom one owed.

It could even be considered a sin.

“Despite how lively the city is, everyone is working themselves to the bone because they cannot pay back their debts. Some even say that the reason so many people are carousing in the streets is because they’re watching to make sure the people they lent money to don’t run off.”

Or perhaps there were so many people at the end of their rope that the

rumor was spreading as though it were true.

“Even though all the product we brought from the village has already been sold, the Laud Company still will not pay us for it. About five of us—including the bishop, the mayor, and their helpers—are stationed at the company’s building in order to pressure them, but we haven’t gotten them to budge.”

“There are groups from other villages who are apparently in a similar position, so they’re probably arguing over who will get paid first.”

“We have some stores back in the village, but we may be in for a very hungry winter at this rate. How have things turned out for you, Lady Elsa? How much in terms of assets did the church have?”

Elsa had been left in charge of managing the bishopric’s assets.

The woman kept her expression and retrieved the money order from her breast pocket.

“We have managed to sell the cursed mountain off to the Debau Company.”

“Ohhh!”

“What?!”

Everyone grew excited, but Elsa calmed them down by clearing her throat.

“It was Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo here who solved the secret of the mountain and introduced me to the Debau Company.”

When Elsa said that, their earlier aloofness vanished in an instant. They clasped both Lawrence and Holo’s hands so hard it was painful and pulled them into ecstatic hugs.

“How wonderful! We may buy plenty of goods to last the winter with the money. I wondered how things might end up for a moment there, but I’m certain this news will also give the bishop and the mayor some peace of mind. Let’s call everyone back right away and hit the stores.”

Elsa stood before the men as they voiced relief about how they were glad this matter was settled to one another, and she quickly put the money order away back into her pocket before saying, “It sounds like the Laud Company is in greater trouble than I’d expected.”

“What?”

Elsa looked at the bewildered villagers with eyes that were almost cold.

Holo looked among them, excited that something was about to happen.

“I’ve heard that the Laud Company has worked very hard for the Vallan Bishopric for a long time...Don’t tell me you think everything is perfectly fine as long as we can get by with the money from the sale of the mountain.”

The people of the bishopric were clearly distressed.

“B-but, Lady Elsa, things might turn out badly if you aren’t careful and get needlessly involved in their problems. Are you planning on saving the Laud Company with the money order? The same company that hasn’t paid us yet?”

“If we are able to assist the Laud Company, then it would not be only them that we would be helping.”

“What...do you...?”

Elsa lightly cleared her throat.

“The reason they have not paid you is because they themselves have not yet received payment for the crops that the villagers worked so hard to harvest. By helping them, we will also recover the proceeds for the harvest. Leaving them to their fate would not only be a loss for the bishopric but would also be an insult to the villagers, the lambs of God, who have given their all. Do you really think that as long as we have covered our losses, then all is well? Your way of thinking completely disregards the efforts of those who have worked so hard!”

All the men were taken aback at Elsa’s steadfast moral argument. Lawrence was no exception.

Elsa wanted to help the Laud Company not because they had done anything for her, nor was it because she saw an opportunity to be owed a favor, but because she wanted to protect and honor the bishopric people’s efforts.

However, the first thought that came to Lawrence was the possibility that it might cost more to save the company than whatever the village had earned from the sale of the harvest. In that case, there was ultimately no point, at least financially speaking...The priests seemed to have the same idea. Right as it

seemed like they were beginning to suspect Elsa was not looking at reality—

“I looked through all the account books.”

“...?”

Elsa glared at the men and, like an arrow, thrust a finger at them.

“You clearly have no grasp of how to handle money! Waste, unaccounted expenditures, mistakes in calculation—it’s all a mess! What do you even think income and expenditures are?! Perhaps this sloppy accounting was tolerable when the bishopric was thriving, but that does not mean that such behavior is acceptable for servants of God! Is it only at times like these do you think about profits and losses?! What on earth for?!”

They bowed their heads at Elsa’s reprimanding, shrinking in on themselves.

It seemed as though the Vallan Bishopric was not strapped for cash because there was no more rock salt to be found or because the ore mines had dried up. As a holdover from their days of plenty, no one managed expenses properly, and that attitude had been passed along as new hands came to hold the reins. Everyone in charge had been complicit and careless.

But it was not just the village men who reflected as Elsa scolded them; Lawrence did the same.

People from every walk of life put a price on the results of their labor and had to live off that price. While it would be difficult to survive if the gains were not higher than the costs, Elsa tacked on the question of *What for?*

Lawrence realized he had unconsciously glanced at Holo.

There was little doubt that he loved making money, but there was no question that there was another standard of value. There were times when he would cast aside gains and voluntarily take on losses for this other standard, and it was none other than an act to improve the value of his life.

Elsa was an unparalleled member of the clergy.

Lawrence genuinely thought that.

“That is why I will not allow you to rely on this money order so easily! Take the appropriate measures—ask Mr. Lawrence here to teach you his ways and

look into the situation at the Laud Company this instant! This is all to pay back the villagers for their labor, and it is in accordance with God's will!"

Several full-grown men stood perfectly straight after enduring the scathing lecture of a woman who was both two sizes smaller and two decades younger. Though Elsa had likely come to the Vallan Bishopric as a mediator for a higher-ranking priest, that was not the only reason these men would never be any match for her.

"That is all! May God show you the way!"

Elsa's lecture finally came to an end, and the thoroughly cowed men timidly approached Lawrence.

The Laud Company was reportedly founded by a family from the south in order to make a name for themselves right when the city of Salonia was starting to develop. The current one in charge was the fourth-generation owner, and in the preceding years, the business had grown to become a midsize company with a fairly good reputation.

Though they fundamentally dealt in every sort of good, their staple was unquestionably wine—typical for companies of a certain size. It was normal for only a very limited number of companies to be issued permits for types of alcohol that would never fall in demand. Because of that, Lawrence could tell that the Laud Company was not in terrible standing within the city.

"They haven't been dabbling in odd speculations, either, have they?"

The wine the young villagers who had been playing cards outside of the room had prepared for them was likely the kind the Laud Company dealt in. That was the first thing Lawrence asked as he sipped on his slightly sour wine.

"We also suspected it was a failed business deal, too. This is a market full of wheat and farm products...there is no lack of trade that may as well be gambling. At the same time, it's also full of mutual acquaintances. No one can hide anything."

Speculating on the futures of next year's wheat harvest, for example, could either make one rich or rob one of all their money. Lawrence, too, came very close to a dreadful experience in the herring egg trade not too long ago.

“Then did it seem like the company was making money?” he asked, and the priest and villager who were offering the explanations glanced at each other.

“I will not blame you if you are wrong.”

Relieved by Elsa’s reassurance, the villager opened his mouth.

“We didn’t take them at their word...but the owner of the Laud Company insisted that they were doing fine.”

That was entirely possible. Lawrence nodded knowingly, and that was apparently unexpected to someone who was not familiar with the world of trade.

“B-but if they are doing well, then why are they refusing to pay us? How can they be making money and still be in dire straits? It feels like something doesn’t add up.”

Lawrence glanced briefly at Holo, who had settled by the window and was gazing out at the city, enjoying the autumn breeze as she sipped her wine. Then he promptly gave them the same explanation he had given to her, explaining how it was entirely possible for a company making money to still go under. It was a problem that was born from the difference in the calculations in the account books and what actually existed within the cash boxes.

They looked like they had been shown an optical illusion, but what bothered Lawrence was the worrying bonus that usually came with talk of trade.

“There’s something I want to check before I head over to the Laud Company—could you tell me more about the merchant that the Church here threw in jail? The reason for their imprisonment and the general feel of the situation, too, if you can. Basically, I want to know if that’s something the locals here expect of the Church or if it was a big surprise to everyone.”

Holo, whose bangs tickled her forehead while her eyes drooped in content, realized there was nothing in her mug and confirmed it by turning it upside down and shaking it. Only then did she finally turn her attention to the buzz of conversation in the room.

Holo’s ears could hear the lies that people told.

Though they could trust Elsa, it was uncertain if they could trust the rest of the people who hailed from the Vallan Bishopric.

Just as Elsa had been graciously tasked with a touchy decision, there were times when outside merchants were essentially made scapegoats. It was not a good sign if they tried to hide something from Lawrence or even trick him.

That was because if he casually tried to stick his nose into this predicament, it wasn't out of the question that he could be accused of some crime tomorrow.

Luckily, there was no one who could deceive Holo's eyes and ears when it came to secretive battles in the forest.

"I-if you're okay with just hearing what little we know..."

Perhaps pressured by Holo and Lawrence's stares, the man who apparently worked as the head priest at the Vallan Bishopric's church explained everything to them.

Moneylending was said to be a great sin that could earn the perpetrators a spot in the deepest parts of hell, but as long as interest rates did not exceed what was appropriate, it wasn't necessarily a terrible crime. For that reason, the Church did not completely outlaw the borrowing and lending of money.

It would be best to share what one had with those who were in trouble; lending a traveler a blanket for one night, for example, was laudable, and offering thanks when paying back what one owed was also in accordance with the teachings of the faith.

"That is why there should technically be no problem, from a canon law point of view, with giving a moderate loan. That's why it wasn't just the city merchants who were surprised, but we were as well..."

"And the ecclesiastical chapter here has always had a reputation of being lenient on trade, which makes it even more so."

The reason their choice of words was so cautious was likely because they were in the presence of Elsa, who was particular when it came to discussions of faith. No priest wanted to give the impression that they were infatuated with trade and money-making in front of a fellow member of the clergy...

Elsa, however, showed no particular interest and silently waited for him to continue.

“Is there a reason they’re so charitable with traders and merchants? Say...for example, do they get a great deal of donations?”

The head priest and all the others shook their heads in hesitation at Lawrence’s roundabout questioning.

“I cannot say with confidence that they do not, but...I believe their donations fall within what’s expected.”

“Given historical events, I think it’s only natural that the city is so lenient on trade.”

Both Holo and Elsa seemed to have their interests piqued by that statement.

The priests glanced at one another, signaling to each other, and in the end, it was the elder head priest who elaborated.

“For the origin of the Salonia church, we must harken back to when this area was nothing but a featureless field that extended to the horizon in every direction. A small church was built on the spot that hosted an irregular market for surrounding farming villages to barter and for them to sell their harvests to visiting merchants. It is said that a wandering missionary priest settling down here was the starting point of the city.”

If Lawrence’s experiences were correct, then wandering priests who settled down in lively places that belonged to nobody were at best those who had been kicked out and tended to be persuasive men who had little to do with the pious life.

“The priests who came after him worked hard. They even built inns for the merchants who frequented this irregular market. Before long, ever greater numbers of people began to gather, and it started to look more like a town. Eventually, this was declared an official diocese right at the same time the grand market was formally established. As you can see, the history of the Salonia church is one that developed side by side with merchants.”

“In that case, do you think that current events are what led to the sudden arrest of a merchant for the sin of moneylending?”

When Lawrence asked, Holo shrank back slightly.

The world was currently roiling over the question of what shape faith should take. It was by and large the Church's own doing, since they had long simply done as they pleased, but the ones who stood at the center stirring the pot were none other than their inexperienced daughter, Myuri, and Col, so Lawrence and his wife could not exactly pretend like they were totally uninvolved. They were both proud and terrified that the children they had raised themselves had gone out into the world and were making such big waves. And like anyone would know if they moved a big crate that had been sitting untouched in storage for a long time, even the slightest shift would kick up a lot of dust.

Col and Myuri's adventure was bringing a wave of change, and they knew that was not always a good thing. When he got right down to it, this commotion was the main reason Lawrence had traveled all the way to the Vallan Bishopric where they ran into Elsa.

That being said, there was no way for the gravely nodding head priest to know that the flagbearer of the Church's reformations sweeping the world was essentially Lawrence's son.

"That is exactly why...I cannot say it's a bother for the Twilight Cardinal, though..."

As a clergyman who worked in a church, he heaved a heavy sigh. Holo, who seemed ill-mannered yet was surprisingly conscious of how others saw her, looked away like a cat when she saw his troubled face.

"Our bishopric received a notice from the archdiocese as well: Adjust your assets to a reasonable level so that they are in accordance with God's will. That is why we received Lady Elsa's help. And...actually, the reason all of us including the bishop are here is related to this problem. We have been hearing disquieting rumors for a while now."

"Disquieting rumors?" Lawrence asked in return, and Elsa spoke up.

"That churches and cathedrals in market towns with thriving trade are under special orders to eliminate certain transactions that can act as hotbeds for dishonest business. You must be aware of this."

He had told Elsa about the herring egg trade in Atiph.

Lawrence hummed. “So that means the futures market for wheat and farm produce might be regarded as gambling and subsequently banned.”

“That’s right. We buy all sorts of goods in order to get us through the winter, but we never buy what we see in the shopwindows. It’s normal practice to reserve wheat, oil, and meat for the future. That is suspected as a form of gambling every now and then.”

Many forms of trade were born out of necessity. Lawrence did not feel the need to comment on it and simply nodded.

“On the slim chance that all futures trading was banned, there would be chaos. And so when we came here to make sure that wouldn’t happen, another problem cropped up.”

“Yes, we could see that there would be a big commotion if so much trade was stopped. The bishop here in this town understands that as well. However, not doing anything at all invites suspicion of vices and corruption.”

“And so the bishop of Salonia came up with a plan...Surprisingly, he thought it would be for the best to throw a merchant in jail, all for the sake of protecting trade.”

That was an unexpected reason.

“That was the best option? To put a merchant behind bars?”

“Yes. Everyone in this city right now is riddled with various debts, so people are finding it harder and harder to conduct business. Even though there is so much trade occurring—it’s all quite strange. Eventually, the bishop decided he had had enough and used the authority of God to shock the market back into normalcy.”

Everyone was suffering from debts piling up because no one was paying what they owed, which simply exacerbated the situation. By warning them that not paying back debts had consequences, payments would in theory begin flowing again.

Though Lawrence could somewhat understand the logic, he couldn’t help the

bitter expression that crept onto his face.

“Did it not have the exact opposite effect, though?”

The head priest and the villagers glanced at one another again, then hung their heads as though it had been their own mistake.

“That’s exactly right. Even we’re terrified that we might also be thrown in jail at this rate, and while the amount of coins circulating is scarcer than ever, the collection of debts has become even more relentless. We’ve heard that the biggest company owners are locking horns in heated talks and that has somehow kept transactions going in the meanwhile. But we’ve also heard that they’re refusing any resolution that involves handing over even a single silver coin to other companies.”

What would happen if someone came along and tugged on both ends of a tangled thread without thinking?

Any remaining breathing room would vanish, and the thread would become even more tightly knotted.

“Why have things come to this?” the head priest asked in a fit of despair. “The city is practically overflowing with trade.”

The nearby open window offered them a good look at the bustling city.

The crossroads were almost unimaginably busy, and the inns and taverns were brimming with customers.

“There are times when we even wondered if there’s a demon hiding in this city,” the man beside the head priest muttered weakly. Elsa raised an eyebrow, and the head priest was startled when he heard him say that.

The lively city of Salonia, falling into chaos for apparently no reason because a demon had slipped into the throngs of the markets and was secretly causing problems.

It was a relatively common suspicion, but Elsa’s eyes were surprisingly stern.

“Were you being serious when you said that?” Elsa asked, and the head priest frantically spoke up.

“Everyone, including the bishop of Salonia, lives in proper faith. That is an

entirely groundless rumor...Any talk of a demon is certainly not..."

These flustered reactions were likely due to fear that Elsa, who seemed to have ties to influential members of the Church, might call in an inquisitor. If that happened, it was plain to see that the Vallan Bishopric, which bordered the city and actively traded with it, would get caught up in the ensuing maelstrom. Additionally, they were currently in the city itself, so things would become very complicated indeed.

Their worries were unfounded, though, since it seemed that Elsa's question had less to do with faith and more to do with Holo. Perhaps a nonhuman like Holo had slipped into town and was making use of some mysterious power.

Elsa turned to Holo, whose lips upturned slightly as though saying "You blithering fool," and looked away in a huff.

Watching their exchange, Lawrence slowly took a deep breath.

He had a feeling this was all the information they were going to get here and now, and he had a general idea of the current situation.

It was obvious what an ex-traveling merchant should do.

"Well then, why don't we go searching for this demon?"

After all, business couldn't be done while standing still.

Naturally, everyone's attention turned to Lawrence.

Clerical robes garnered far too much attention, so Elsa changed into everyday wear before their group set off for the Laud Company. They saw all sorts of farm produce being bought and sold on the street corners, food stalls packed close together, and a dense crowd gathering before a theater troupe.

On the surface, it looked like the city was just happily enjoying its biannual market, but the fear there was a demon lurking around was understandable considering how tense things were behind the scenes.

While Elsa, the head priest, and the others walked at the front, Lawrence and Holo took up the rear.

"Have you any clue what is happening in this city?"

Even as she took in the sights of the long-awaited grand market, Holo lowered her voice and posed the question to Lawrence.

“You mean whether or not there’s a demon?”

Holo’s face turned slightly sour, perhaps because she recalled the way Elsa had glanced at her.

“That fool must have thought it was one of us.”

“You’ll hear a lot of the same during the outbreak of plagues. People are prone to that kind of superstition. Depending on the town, some will even give a name to the plague, create a doll, and push it over a cliff every year. You know a couple of festivals with traditions like that, don’t you?”

It was not that the ex-merchant Lawrence did not believe in holy miracles and the presence of demons. But he had plenty of experience as an outsider being saddled with the role of the devil, so he approached those stories with a cold look.

“That’s why we need to be careful not to let ourselves be falsely accused and thrown off a cliff, but...”

Holo knew that much. Despite how she had been revered as a god, she had been besmirched, alienated, and chased out by human whim.

“On the other hand, Miss Elsa has the very powerful silver stake that is the money order in her hand. If there really is an evildoer out there, we might be able to bring them down.”

Holo widened her eyes in slight surprise.

“Did that rabbit really give us something so incredible?”

“Incredible...? I’d say the incredible part is just the amount on it. It’s only to be expected, since it represents the value of not just any old mountain, but one that will be very productive. That means the amount written on that money order is quite literally a mountain’s worth of gold. If we were dealing with purely a lack of coin, then we could fight against even the royalty and nobility with that one sheet of paper alone.”

Lawrence, who had scarcely ever seen money of that amount, was excited like

a child who had seen a legendary sword. In his eyes, the way Hilde of the Debau Company had moved such a grand amount of money for a single decision matched the deed of any fairy-tale hero, and the thought alone set his heart ablaze.

“So would you be able to find the evildoer?” Holo said coolly to the giddy Lawrence.

Though Lawrence was the one to take care of and admonish Holo for her indolence and heavy drinking when they were at the inn, she was the careful one when they ventured out into the harsh world.

Her gaze warned him not to get carried away, so he straightened his posture and responded, “What’s interesting about trade is how everything is unquestionably connected by the thread of transactions. If we go back through the transaction records starting with the Laud Company, we will be able to figure out if there’s a demon at the end of it. A simple logic.”

“Hmm...? Do your kind not enjoy your secrets from time to time? And would someone from the city not have already checked that to begin with?”

Holo had a point, but when it came to the people of this city, Lawrence felt confident he was right.

They likely had not looked into it. Perhaps it was more apt to say that they could not. But Lawrence could see them owning up if he said he wanted to do just that.

Holo was skeptical when he mentioned that, but Lawrence simply saw this as a chance to show his skills as an ex-traveling merchant.

And so they arrived at the Laud Company, and his conjecture quickly changed into conviction.

“We ain’t gonna pay what we can’t pay, no matter who ya are!”

That was because when Elsa and the others asked for an audience with the owner of the Laud Company, they were suddenly met with an angry shout.

“I ain’t sayin’ we ain’t payin’ because we’re stingy or greedy! I’m saying it’s ‘cause we got nothin’ to pay with!”

The one yelling, his face bright red, was the elderly owner sporting a bald head and a white beard—Laud himself.

There were several other company executives in the office, but they did not look up from the mountain of account books on the long table. They were too busy trying to squeeze out even a drop of gold from somewhere. It seemed like his yelling was an everyday occurrence at the office; their total lack of reaction almost made it seem like they could not hear Laud yelling at all.

“But you are paying some people, no?”

The moment Elsa made that assertion, Laud’s face went an even brighter red, almost as if the veins bulging in his forehead would burst.

“Of course! Don’t talk as if you know the first thing about trade! We’re doin’ everything we can to make sure we don’t go under, all for you people!”

Elsa’s face seemed to say, “Selfish merchants would never do anything purely out of consideration for anyone else,” but Lawrence perhaps thought that because Elsa’s faces were scary to begin with.

She turned to look at Lawrence over her shoulder for genuine confirmation.

“It might be hard to believe, but there are no merchants who are not bothered by delaying payments to others. If there were, they would be simply swindlers.”

“Exactly!”

Laud’s voice was as loud as always, but it seemed that he recognized Lawrence, who had been introduced as a merchant, as someone who understood what was going on. His shoulders heaved as he breathed, calming down a tad.

“Then is it just to prioritize some payments over others?”

Once again, veins appeared on Laud’s forehead in sharp relief, so Lawrence forestalled his imminent tirade with a signal of his hand.

“It might seem unfair, but in reality, there are payments that can wait and those that cannot. If everyone can get supplies before winter arrives, then things will still work out. Taken a step further, even if your payment comes with

interest nearer to spring, then the net value will work out somehow, will it not?"

It was the people of the Vallan Bishopric behind Elsa who Lawrence spoke to.

"Well, that's..."

"We could provide the poorer families with the stores from the church..."

"Then what would be a payment that can't wait?" Elsa asked boldly, trying to clarify the thread of logic, but Laud's face did not go red this time. Of course, he was an elderly merchant from a large company, or perhaps he had finally gotten a grasp on Elsa's personality.

"Payments that can't wait are transactions that cannot be halted or delayed. For that, it's also important to order 'em from largest to smallest," Laud said as he snatched a cloth that sat on his desk and furiously rubbed his bald head.

Holo blinked, perhaps finding the action funny.

"Heaps of produce's been brought into this city, and it's all passing into merchant hands with dizzyin' speed. Folks're also settling contracts exchanged at the market anywhere from six months up to one year ago. Those can only be completed here in this city, and the transactions are linked to massive companies in other cities. Those absolutely cannot be left undone. Absolutely not," Laud explained, but Elsa let it pass without remark, instead turning to Lawrence again.

"The problem in this town is that since everyone knows one another, they can consult and compromise with each other. But if they're negotiating with someone based in a faraway town, then they don't know and most likely don't care about the circumstances here. They would act much more cautiously—lest they be scammed or taken advantage of. Even with such worries, there are plenty of market towns throughout the world. Clients and patrons from far-off places might just take their business elsewhere. The only way to keep their trust is to pay them."

Elsa nodded quietly at Lawrence's explanation. "And so to pay these people, the city's trade is suffering?" she asked, and Laud furrowed his brow, but Lawrence wasn't quite certain on that point, either.

“Anyone would suffer if they could only ever breathe out.”

That was all Holo had to say for Lawrence to finally understand.

If the people of the city only ever paid out but had no money coming in, then logically, they would only get poorer and poorer.

“There may be other circumstances at play. I doubt the merchants who have come to the city will go home empty-handed...”

This time it was Lawrence who gave Laud a questioning look. He would have a grasp on the trade in the city.

“That’s right. For example, if we pay for the wine we import without any delay, they will trust that we can be relied on for doing business next year as per usual. Then another merchant comes along to reserve wheat with our company for next year, then goes home. The following year brings our wine, we take in wheat, and then he buys his wheat for the next year and goes home. That’s how trade flows, like breathing.”

“And for some reason, that flow is about to stagnate. Is that right?”

Lawrence tried to draw the story out of Laud, and Laud gave a big sigh.

“The cause is clear as day to us,” the disheartened Laud spat. “It’s the inns association. They’re clogging up the waterways of trade.”

“The inns association?”

Lawrence thought it might have been another rival company in trade, so he found it unexpected when Elsa spoke.

“Is that demon or whatnot of the rumors in this city a part of this inns association?”

Laud was practically astonished by Elsa’s almost innocent question.

“Sheesh, you religious types are always on about that stuff. A demon, eh...? I guess you could call ’em that. They put in a huge order of wine but haven’t paid us a single silver for it. They have all those guests crowded into their inns but have no money to pay us back? What are they playing at?”

It was obvious that business was booming at the inns.

“What is their reason for being unable to pay?”

“They just refuse to pay what they can’t pay. Sheesh, the people at the inns association have been notorious for being stingy since my granddaddy’s days. The lot of ’em shouldn’t be allowed to do business here in Salonia. Do they even know how much companies like ours have suffered because of them...?”

His tone suggested he had no idea how to vent his pent-up anger; it sounded like years of resentment had built up.

Lawrence thought this was the reason that no one in the city had ever properly looked into the confusion here. He was correct that even if someone had a mind to, they had no way to follow through.

Cities often had guilds that were divided by occupation, and they often had quarrels that went back generations. It was practically fate for bakers’ and butchers’ guilds to bicker to the point that this often served as the topic of plays. It was not unusual for feuds over honor and profit to devolve into bloodshed.

And so *because* they were natives of the city who had known one another since birth and had been fighting since the time of their ancestors, they found it impossible to open up and explain their situations.

As those thoughts churned in Lawrence’s head, Laud suddenly spoke.

“Ah yeah, on that note, I have a favor to ask.”

Lawrence looked up to see Laud leaning over his desk.

“Could you all go and deal with that dreadful inns association for me?”

“What?”

Laud, almost as though he had not heard Elsa’s bewildered response, quickly grasped her hand with a smile.

“Yes, that’s it! You said you’re the priest who came to help outside the city, at Vallan, right? Those people at the inns association even detest the tails of dogs associated with us. We can’t even hold a proper conversation because of that, and they never listen to anythin’ we have to say—but they might listen to you!”

The reason Holo stirred was likely because of the sudden mention of a dog’s

tail.

“I don’t even care if you use your authority to throw ’em all in jail! You could, in a sense, even force ’em to pay you, and that’d be getting two birds with one stone! Yeah, let’s do that!”

“Er, wait, um—”

“Hans! Give these people our collection bond! We’ll have ’em pluck every last hair off their asses!”

Even Elsa was being tossed about by Laud’s whirlwind of one-sided exclamations, and not a moment later, the man named Hans, who looked like a company executive, thrust a bundle of parchment into her arms.

She had been unable to turn it down likely because she had been shocked by the dead look in Hans’s eyes. Had she rejected the sheaf of papers, it seemed like Hans’s heart would shatter from the weight of it.

“Now, that settles that with the Vallan Bishopric! Glory be to God!”

It would seem the Laud Company, which primarily traded wine in Salonia, was full of crafty folks.

Elsa, after having the bond thrust upon her before being politely sent packing, was still dumbstruck when they left the Laud Company.

“’Tis quite surprising for you to be cornered in such a way.”

Even Holo, who had often been talked in circles by Elsa, found it strange. Lawrence—who was henpecked by Holo, often talked down to by Elsa, and who had been cornered in an argument by Laud—could not help but smile a little.

“It’s almost like the mouse’s wedding.”

“Hrm?”

“There were a mouse mother and father, and they said they wanted someone strong to be their daughter’s groom.”

When Lawrence said that, Elsa, puzzled by the parchment in her hand, also looked up.

“So then when they asked a cat if he wouldn’t marry their daughter, he said

that the youngest son in the manor who always pulled his tail was much stronger.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And so when the mouse parents went to the youngest son, taking a break from chopping firewood, and asked him if he would marry their daughter, he said that the master of the house was far stronger. So when they brought their proposal to the master of the manor, who had just come back from hunting, he yelled, *What are you talking about?! Do you even know how much you’ve done my head in with all the damage you’ve caused? Give me a break!*”

“Oh ho.”

Elsa, who regained her composure, said to Holo, who was enjoying the story, “And so the mice returned to their nest and ultimately chose a mouse to be their daughter’s groom. My children love this story.”

Holo chuckled, then patted around her chest and waist and remembered that she had left her paper and quill back at the inn.

“Tell it to me again later.”

While Lawrence shrugged, he was satisfied that Holo was happy.

“The human world is connected in a great circle...But after being put to work at the whim of someone else, I am not sure if those words provide me any comfort.” Having been saddled with the parchment by Laud, Elsa spoke resentfully.

“But if you manage to get it all back, then that does solve several problems.”

She let him take a look at the parchment, and there was a big number written on it.

“It’s not quite enough to cover their payment to us...Would they consider their debts paid with this?”

“Well...That would be true if we called this a replacement for physical coin. The problem is that we can’t simply buy wheat and meat with this bond.”

“Then there’s no point,” Elsa responded and stared off into the distance in silent thought for a moment. Around her stood the priests and the mayor, as

well as the head priest, their arms folded, wondering what to do.

Then Elsa assumed her usual stern look and said, “I will go to the church now. Mr. Lawrence, could I ask you to handle this collection? There would be nothing better than if we can receive the money without incident.”

“I don’t mind collecting, but...you’re going to the church?”

The serious, honest, and embodiment of faith that was Elsa passed the parchment to Lawrence, then shrugged like a flippant girl.

“While it does seem true that the Laud Company is in trouble...something does not quite sit right with me.”

Those who sought help in the scripture always knelt and begged sincerely.

She was not the kind of person to put a contract in someone’s hand and then chase them out before they had time to respond.

“I am going to ask someone at the church here about the town and about the merchant who was thrown in jail.”

It seemed the Laud Company had awoken doubts in the wrong person. Elsa was not moved by loss and profit but rule and principle.

“Please consult with me as a merchant before you make any decisions.”

Lawrence knew right away why Elsa knitted her eyebrows.

“I am not an overzealous inquisitor.”

It seemed as though she did understand that there would be a terrible uproar throughout the city if she extorted the owner of the Laud Company in the name of the Church.

“Very well. Then I will attempt regular tactics first.”

“Please do. All the happenings in this town are like an odd optical illusion, after all,” Elsa said with a fed-up tone.

Lawrence admired the parchment in his hand, and his mouth curled into a small smile at the dusty scent.

One tall, middle-aged villager from the Vallan Bishopric came along with them.

He was likely keeping an eye on Lawrence to make sure he did not simply run off, since Lawrence held the bond that Laud had thrust onto them. The inns association knew who the mayor and the others were, so someone who typically only helped with shipping goods and did not often come to Salonia had been chosen.

“What should I do?”

“Let’s see...Pretend to be a bodyguard, if you can.”

He likely wielded a plow and carried bales of hay back at the village. If he stayed silent, his tanned, masculine face and muscly shoulders could be passed off as the features of someone who had just washed his hands of a lifetime in the mercenary business.

“I just have to stay quiet and still, right? I know my farming, but I don’t know anything about fighting.”

“That’s perfectly fine. Frown if you can,” Lawrence said, and the man, rubbing his stubble, hummed.

On the way to the inns association, Holo kept glancing back at the man who followed behind them and whispered to Lawrence, “He smells of rather good wheat.”

That seemed to be enough to put her in a good mood, and as Lawrence was thinking about how he might let her have a sniff of some ears of wheat the next time she was cross, they arrived at the inns association.

“These are your people now,” Holo remarked.

The symbol of the Salonia inns association was a tankard and a knife—these two items were laid across each other on the metal sign that hung from the eaves.

“I still see myself as a merchant, and if I had to describe it, the bathhouse in Nyohhira is a company.”

“Oh? You sound like an old man insisting he is still young.”

Lawrence shrugged when Holo teased him, but his eyes widened at what she said next.

“But it might perhaps be best if I am not with you.”

Lawrence tilted his head, and Holo gave him an exasperated look.

“Fool. Have you forgotten what happened before?”

“When?” he asked in return, and Holo frowned in displeasure.

“When you took heavy losses and went around searching for a place that would lend you money.”

Not long after he met Holo, he got caught in an arms deal that proved to be a trap and put his finances in very dire straits indeed.

Then he had gone around to different shops, asking if he might perhaps borrow just a bit of money. He had no energy to pay attention to his surroundings and ran about with Holo in tow. Naturally, everyone he came across yelled at him, asking him if he intended to make fools of them by begging for money with a woman at his side.

“I have not forgotten how much it hurt when you slapped away my hand back then.”

He had taken his frustration out on her, wishing she had not been around.

Holo looked up at Lawrence, reproach in her reddish-amber eyes.

It was a bitter past he did not want to remember if he could help it.

“I get an awful sweat on my back even now when I think back on that, but I’m not the same as I was then. Well, just watch.”

Holo looked doubtfully at him when he said that, but she just shrugged and held her tongue.

Lawrence took a deep breath and braced himself before opening the door to the inns association.

The first floor felt somewhat like a tavern, where association members gathered for meetings and to eat and drink.

There were people sitting here and there at the tables, glum looks on all their faces.

“My name is Kraft Lawrence, and I am a merchant. Is the association

president in?”

Lawrence introduced himself, and everyone in the room looked at him like he was a shady fellow, but in the back, a man with a potbelly stood up.

“I am the president. What do you need?”

“Well, well.” Lawrence bowed courteously in an almost theatrical manner, cleared his throat, then said, “I am sorry to bother you while you are so busy, but I have come with a bond from the Laud Company.”

He could feel Holo’s uncertain gaze from somewhere behind him, and the atmosphere in the whole room hardened all at once.

This did not cause Lawrence to shrink, however; he looked back at the president with a smile still on his face.

The sudden silence continued, and a dry smile finally broke across the president’s face.

“Well, you’re not a very bright merchant, are you? That old snake duped you, didn’t he?”

“Perhaps.”

Lawrence remained composed, so the president’s smile vanished, and he looked disappointed.

“I won’t say anything bad. Take that bond of yours and go home. I don’t know what the people at the Laud Company told you, though.”

Lawrence brushed off Holo’s gaze that asked him, “What are you planning by making things feel so grim?” and said, “No, that is exactly how things have gone.”

“Hrm?”

“I was forced to take this bond. They did it so skillfully. That is why...I want an excuse to bring it back to them.”

He gave a bootlicking smile, and after the association president blinked, he glanced at the other fellows in the room.

“Hoh-hoh...is that so?”

“Yes. It seemed like the accounts collectible for our farm produce might end up irrecoverable, so we marched into the Laud Company, but after having this pushed on me, they chased us out.”

There was still a hint of doubt left in the president’s eyes, but he jerked his chin at one of the association members near Lawrence, so the man stood from his chair and grabbed at the parchment in Lawrence’s hand.

“...This is a bond from the Laud Company all right. That greedy old man; what a pain in my rear.”

With a curse, he violently shoved the bond back into Lawrence’s chest.

The villager pretending to be a bodyguard standing behind him stirred, and Holo, beside him, clenched her fangs together, but Lawrence had no intention of getting angry over every little slight.

“Well, how about it? Why don’t you tell me, in your own words, why the inns association can’t pay?”

There were not that many people who were okay with being unable to keep their promises, and an outsider suddenly asking why they were unable to make good on what they owed would typically earn them a swift exit from the premises.

Lawrence, however, had come at them boldly and been unwavering direct.

The president, who protected the association’s honor and profits, placed a hand on a table and sighed, then said, “If I tell you the reason, will you take that bond back to the Laud Company?”

“That would depend on the reason.”

The association members immediately drew up their eyebrows and several of them stood. The president stopped them with a motion of his hand.

“Stop. He’s waltzed right in here with a woman. We have our own principles, yeah?”

Lawrence smiled wordlessly, and the association president scratched his head. Holo only stared blankly—she likely was not used to these sorts of interactions. Last time, Lawrence had been called irresponsible because Holo

was around, but now it seemed to be working in their favor.

“We’ve of course explained to the Laud Company, but we’ve told other companies, too...We can’t pay.”

“Could you show me any proof?”

“Hey!” some of the others shouted, but the association president twisted his lips before walking over to the accounting desk and pulling out a thick bundle of paper.

“The way our association works is that orders come in internally; then we send out those orders to the companies as an association. Make sense?”

“I’ve been to other cities before. I understand.”

If left alone, places with financial muscle might buy up all the food and whatnot to serve at their inn for themselves. Even with nice, clean beds, an inn would get no guests without wine or meat or bread, so the association took charge of orders to reduce unnecessary competition among inns.

And at the same time, the association could amass leverage when dealing with the places they ordered from by consolidating orders.

“Our payment to the Laud Company is...well, as you can see, it matches up with that bond you got there.”

“It does, yes.”

“And...here’s a list of all the people who’re late on paying.”

“S-sir!” some unintentionally burst out. There was a whole series of inn names listed on the paper, and there was a dense wall of numbers in record. These were the businesses who had outstanding payments due, regardless of how they had placed their orders through the association.

“If they put off payment out of temporary embarrassment, then they deserve to be embarrassed. Or do you want to see this merchant here run off to the church with this bond in hand?”

Laud was a company that did business in the same city as them, but Lawrence was clearly an outsider. Though they feuded with the company, with whom they have had ties since their grandfathers’ time, there was one final line that

they would never cross as people from the same city.

An outsider, though, could conceivably rely on whatever authorities they could without thinking of the consequences.

And the same logic made it possible for them to reveal shameful details and discuss their long-standing feud with an outsider in a way that they never would with Laud.

“...That is quite an amount, but do you mind if I ask you why these people have put off paying? It seems quite obvious that all the inns have been flooded with business.”

The president shut the account book with a *thud* and said with a bothered tone, “You said you’re a traveling merchant, yeah? You might not know this, since you’re on the guest side of things, but running an inn is real hard work.”

Lawrence didn’t think this was the time to mention that he ran a bathhouse in Nyohhira, so he simply nodded meekly.

“In cities like these, most of our guests are merchants who are frequent patrons. They stay for a long time to settle accounts from the last grand market and to make purchases, and they drink and eat a lot in order to gather information from their buddies. So they’re good customers who steadily fill up the rooms, but it’s because they’re good customers that consequently makes them a burden.”

“Is it deferred payment?”

When Lawrence spoke, the association president shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s exactly right. They drink and drink and eat and eat, but it all goes on their tab. That said, if *everything* went on a tab, nothing would get done, so it’s the custom here for most people to settle their accounts once at the midpoint of the market.”

When he said that much, Lawrence knew what he was trying to say.

“All those payments are being delayed?”

“Yeah. Things are particularly slow this year, and they say the reason they can’t pay is...”

“...Is because someone else hasn’t paid them.”

The president nodded; then several of the association members—inn owners, essentially—started to gather around Lawrence.

The villager pretending to be a bodyguard went on alert like a real escort, and Holo started a growl deep in her throat. However, once they surrounded Lawrence, the businessmen were not violent with him but instead started to voice their discontent.

“We *want* to pay. If old man Laud and those other company people took an arrogant attitude with us, we’d be the ones in shame! But there are considerably more people begging us to wait this year, which has caused us no end of trouble.”

“Exactly. Y’see, the lumber merchants are particularly bad this year. Tellin’ us that the people they sell their wood to aren’t paying them and then come cryin’ to ask us to wait! They should be makin’ plenty of money considering how marked up lumber is these days. They’re just playing the damn victim card!”

Lawrence knew all about the markup on lumber. That was one of the reasons why they were able to sell the cursed mountain for such a high price.

“Well, that’s just the obvious example, but if you count all the merchants, most of ’em are asking to delay their bills. These people’ll stay with us next year and the year after that, and it’s not a stretch to think their apprentices will, too. They come crying to us, saying we have to wait. But they eat our food and drink our drink. We need to make orders for ourselves in order to live. Actually, our payments to the bakers and butchers are also delayed, but those idiot merchants who don’t understand facts are practically treating us like we run dens of evil.”

Everyone there gave their approval.

Lawrence glanced at Holo, and she shrugged, uninterested. It seemed as though they were not offering up half-baked stories in an attempt to get off the hook.

“I understand your predicament very well,” Lawrence said, putting the Laud Company bond back into his breast pocket. “And we’ve had a good heart-to-

heart, Mr. President.”

He should pay his respects since he had been shown the accounts book, and before Lawrence came, they had been pressured for all sorts of things, so perhaps they felt like making excuses was too much of a hassle.

“No, I’m glad you understand.”

The association president extended his hand, and Lawrence gripped it firmly. After seeing that, the other association members, perhaps relieved after voicing their grievances, sought handshakes from him, too. Some even invited him to stay at their inn, so long as he paid in cash, and a wry smile spread across his face. They were not crooks or bad people. They were regular residents of the city who showed mercy to those struggling to pay and felt responsibility for not being able to pay themselves.

They left, passing under the eaves where the sign with the tankard and knife hung, and Lawrence gave a little sigh.

“Well, what are you going to do?”

Lawrence did not respond to Holo’s question and looked to the villager.

“Do you know where an inn called the Hay and Scythe is?”

The villager looked at him blankly and responded, “It’s the biggest inn in Salonia.”

“Could you take me there? They had the most unpaid charges in that account book.”

Both Holo and the villager looked surprised.

“Are you going to confirm if the people here were lying?”

Holo’s tired yet somewhat irritated tone of voice was likely because she thought he did not trust her ears. The people of the inns association had not lied. They truly could not pay the companies they had ordered from because of guests who had yet to pay their tabs.

“I’m not going to see if they’ve lied. I’m going to examine the substance of the truth.”

“Hmm?”

Holo looked at him dubiously, but he patted her shoulder and asked the villager to guide them.

Everything in trade was tied together.

That was why following it would bring them to the cause, so they should go and take a look after coming this far.

“Now, time to see if there really is a demon here.”

Who was the cheapskate who refused to pay at the very beginning? Lawrence, Holo, and the villager walked through the lively city and made their way toward the Hay and Scythe, where they chatted up some of the merchants gathered there. The first two were a bust, but they found the merchant they were looking for by the third one.

“...Really? You aren’t actually representatives of the Church, are you?”

It was a lumber merchant who was openly wary. Lawrence spoke to him on the pretense that the Debau Company had bought a nearby mountain, so he was investigating the price of lumber. And of course, the lumber merchant seemed to sense that it was the mountain out in the Vallan Bishopric. And that reminded him of the poor merchant who had been convicted of lending money by the Church and then thrown into jail.

Lawrence assured the merchant with a smile, “I swear to God I’m not,” and listened to his story.

Exactly as the inns association and the Laud Company did, the lumber merchant grumpily poured out his grievances about the people he was trading with.

It sounded like he had sold to a company that dealt in lumber, but they had not properly paid him back. He even went as far as to claim that he should stop selling lumber to companies in the city if he did not want to make the Debau Company angry.

And apparently, it was not just the lumber merchant but all the merchants who came and went from the city and were staying at the inns; the wool

merchants and oil merchants, even specialty merchants who dealt with the smoking of herring were all in dire straits.

Lawrence gave his thanks and bought him a glass of wine.

Neither Holo nor the villager asked where they were going to next.

The villager knowingly led the way—"It's over here"—and brought them to the company that dealt in lumber.

As they stood in the high-ceilinged loading area, the scent of wood wafting about them, they listened to another deluge of complaints.

"It's the craftsmen! Their laziness is causing all this! They order all the materials they want, then don't produce anything and just wait for prices to go up! How many times do they think we've given them an advance on materials when they were having a rough time?! The ungrateful lot of them! And whose side are you on, huh?!"

The villager saved Lawrence just as the merchant edged up close to him, and they rushed out of the company.

"The craftsmen next, then," Lawrence said. Holo was already finding the whole process a tedious exercise, but he of course did not stop.

However, the place that served as the craftsmen's association was different from all the other places, so when they arrived at the woodworkers' union hall, Lawrence asked Holo to hang back.

"You moron! Our artisans would never do a thing like that! You want a good punch to the mug, huh?!"

Lawrence had his lapels grabbed, and the other hardy and short-tempered masters closed in on him and pinned him against the wall. The villager acting as his guard tried to save him, but he was outnumbered.

"We guarantee our artisans are delivering top-quality goods! You're not getting away with siding with the people who aren't paying us!"

After being taunted, threatened, and then somehow escaping, he met up with Holo, who could tell at a glance what had happened. She gave the craftsmen's association building a withering look and clenched her jaws, but Lawrence

figured he had been let off rather easy. He patted Holo's shoulders in order to calm her down and smiled.

"The masters were genuinely on edge. And if we peek into the artisans' alley over there, that should make everything clear. You can hear them singing and hammering wood. They're not being lazy with work at all."

"Perhaps so, but..."

Lawrence adjusted his wrinkled clothes, and Holo groaned in vexation.

"More importantly, who is at fault here?" asked the taciturn villager impatiently.

The chain of transaction seemed to continue endlessly.

If they were to head to the swordsmiths' union next, for example, the villager could already see he might lose one of his ears.

"At the very least, there's somebody that's not paying the woodworkers."

The villager sighed and scratched his head in defeat. Holo wore a dissatisfied frown, not pleased about how Lawrence had been the target of so much hostility.

Lawrence, however, felt something close to conviction.

Despite how everyone was doing their job, no one was being paid. Trade was established by a long chain of interactions, which meant that if no one was getting their money, then there most certainly was a stingy fellow who was refusing to pay near the top.

That being said, while the world of trade felt infinite, it in fact was not.

Lawrence's experience and wisdom whispered to his soul.

The turning point that led to the right path was right in front of him.

Even though he could not yet see its form clearly, it was still there—his conviction was, without a doubt, inside him.

He was a traveling merchant who had been around the world, after all.

"...Dear?" Holo anxiously called to Lawrence as he stood, unmoving.

Her reddish-amber eyes changed hue with determination, with fear, with unease. They were the kaleidoscopic eyes of a wolf.

Holo's eyes, almost the color of wine, gave him a revelation.

"Oh yeah, that's it."

Trade was one long thread.

Even a miscellaneous assortment of cities and trade that seemed willy-nilly actually had very obvious connections.

"Our pilgrimage will end at the next place."

Holo and the villager looked at Lawrence as though he was suffering from a bout of out-of-season sunstroke.

But he was already quite confident he had figured it out.

His clue was something that could almost certainly be found nearby when Holo was in town.

"Next..."

Lawrence whispered into the villager's ear, and he led the way.

He did not ask who the bad person was there. He only confirmed with him that it was *he* who was the bad one. Both Holo and the villager realized the answer the moment they stood in front of the building.

Holo's tail was clearly puffed in anger under her coat.

Where they headed after the woodworkers' union was a place that required an item that was considered the most important among wood products and was most sought after—barrels.

That was, in short, the brewers' association, and if one was to name something that went in barrels, it would be alcohol.

And so if the brewers' association was unable to pay for the barrels, then who was at fault?

Companies that dealt in alcohol.

"That bald man duped us."

They stood before the Laud Company, and Holo's eyes glinted. The villager, their substitute guard, scratched his head as though he had been dazzled by a spectacular performance.

All merchants were troubled since they were not getting paid, but as they went back through each transaction, they had come back to the starting point.

Then it was clear who was at fault here.

That was because the mouse's parents had gone in search for a groom for their daughter and ultimately came back to their nest.

"...That's what I wanted to say, but sure enough..." Lawrence said, hesitant, and for a moment, Holo looked at him in astonishment.

"What are you talking about? You tracked down the fox's trail and have caught its tail, no?"

The villager nodded, too. In both their heads, they were likely seeing things unfolding where Lawrence dashed into the company, proclaimed to Laud that he had seen through his evil deeds, and strung him up.

But things would not go so easily as that.

"The Laud Company only seems like the bad people here simply because this is where we started. What would you think if we were lumber merchants and we marched in to yell at the woodworkers' union?"

"...Ah."

She must have pictured all the places they had been so far and imagined coming back to where they were at the end.

The transaction was a circle, and there was no way to know where the starting point was.

"Wh-what is this, then...? What does this mean?"

"It's like a snake eating its own tail."

The villager's simile was on point.

"...Then what shall we do? Do we simply do as the bald one told us to do?"

Holo seemed to be entirely on Elsa's side.

And this was not exactly the sort of situation that would end neatly if they were to yell at Laud and confront him with evidence.

“Well, this isn’t something an ex–traveling merchant like me can deal with easily.”

Lawrence finally had a firm grasp on the situation.

Yet, there was nothing he could do.

Not as a former traveling merchant, at least.

Lawrence shrugged in a display of helplessness, but he already had a plan in his head.

That was because over a journey that felt short yet long, former traveling merchants had established assets that were hard to come by out of their many adventures. If he used those, he could turn this impossible staircase around and straighten this whole thing out.

It was then he turned to Holo, deciding it was about time to reveal his hand.

He froze.

Holo stood in place, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Wait, what?”

She did not even wipe them away with her hand. Her eyes were wide open as tears continuously poured out, almost expressionless. The only thing that gave away an emotion was how she bit slightly at her lip.

“Hey, Holo?”

Lawrence hurriedly wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her, but Holo continued to cry.

The villager was flustered, too, but he looked around the area and found an alley next to the Laud Company and pointed them to it.

Lawrence only thanked him with a glance and walked over with Holo, still holding her, to the quiet alley, out of sight from others.

“Hey, what’s wrong—what happened?”

He tried to have her sit on a nearby crate, but she refused, shaking her head.

The bewildered Lawrence was beside himself and did all that he could.

He slowly wrapped his arms around her in an embrace, making sure he did not distress her.

As Holo shrunk down and cried, he was shocked—had she always been this small?

“...I am sorry,” Holo said in his arms.

“No...you don’t have to apolo—”

“I do.”

Holo shook her head, then pushed away against Lawrence’s chest.

That was not out of rejection.

Lawrence understood that she did it out of self-condemnation.

“I have to...” Holo sniffled, still crying. Lawrence was at a loss, without the slightest idea as to why she was crying. Yet, for him, who had been to so many places and had spent such a long time with her, hand in hand, he knew what to do not logically but emotionally when he looked at her face.

There were times when Holo, who had spent so much of her life alone, unlike their daughter, Myuri, was caught in a languid darkness. She blamed herself.

Lawrence knew well what he should do in times like this.

He gave her another hug with a little more force this time, then gripped her shoulders and peered into her eyes.

“You’ll tell me about it, right?”

Her red eyes, damp with tears, were like those of a young child. That was her weakness, one she only ever showed him. She nodded slowly, then he urged her to sit on the crate, and she spoke.

“I went...*sniff*, to see...the rabbit, no?”

It was so sudden that it confused him, but he understood that “the rabbit” must have referred to Hilde.

“You mean, to Mr. Hilde? That’s...when you went to the Debau Company, right?”

Holo nodded, and a tear fell to her knee.

“They were...amazing. It was a big...a big company.”

The Debau Company had almost total control over trade in the northlands, and they even minted their own currency. For all intents and purposes, they could even be considered the most powerful figures up in the whole north, which had no large dominant countries due to geography. Lawrence would not be surprised if the Debau Company’s main branch had turned into a castle at this point.

“They had so many things...a literal mountain of gold...And when the rabbit heard what I had to say, he called in some smart-looking people and came to a decision in an instant.”

There were likely plenty of distinguished people, and they probably could not spend too much time on one case because they were busy. At the same time yet, there was a part of him that still wondered why she stayed out there for four days in that case.

Had she truly pestered them for meat and drink and spent the whole time eating and drinking?

“I was shocked...It is such a big mountain that that squirrel held so dear. The fate of the mountain had been decided in the span of a few moments. Truly in a flash. That massive and good mountain that the foolish squirrel treasures from the bottom of her heart. And the rabbit decided on its sale in just a few blinks of the eye...”

Lawrence could easily imagine what sort of shock Holo suffered at the Debau Company. Great merchants like Hilde dealt with gold more valuable than their lives on a daily basis. Even Lawrence, who was deeply familiar with trade, thought of it as a tale of a different world, so Holo must have been unspeakably shocked.

But what was odd was that even as shocked as Holo may have been, that didn’t seem to explain why she was crying. Much less at a time like this. As he

thought about how strange that was, Holo grasped his hand, as though searching for support in the darkness.

She squeezed tight.

“You...you could have been there.”

“...What?”

Astonished, Lawrence asked in turn, and Holo lifted her head to look at Lawrence. Regret was written all over her face.

“That rabbit invited you. To come to that company.”

Her mouth moved, and he understood what it was that hid behind her eyes.

When the Debau Company faced a crisis and seemed like it might split apart, Lawrence had taken Hilde’s side and been a help in making them whole. At the conclusion of that incident, Hilde had invited Lawrence to join the renewed Debau Company. He had refused.

He had turned down an offer to walk the path of success, one that was so great it was impossible for any merchant to even begin to imagine a better one.

“Ahhh...”

Lawrence made a noise like he had been suddenly caught out in the rain and looked up at the sky.

What Holo meant was that it would not have been all that odd if Lawrence had been the one making the decision of whether to buy the mountain for Tanya the squirrel’s sake, doing so with a nod and holding the quill that gave final approval.

He remembered Elsa reprimanding those priests.

Even if one were to weigh loss and profit on the scales, for what reason did anybody choose profit anyway?

Lawrence had answered that question, not by choosing the path of gold but the path in the forest covered in fallen leaves.

All for the scent of the woods and the lonely wolf who lived there.

“I...understood that I shut a door for you. You could have...You could have

commanded such a great number of people in such an amazing...in such a lively place of trade, but I..."

As her tears, which had just started to calm, began to flow again, Lawrence kissed her on the cheek.

"Your tears are salty," Lawrence said and smiled. "If I went to the Debau Company and became someone with influence, I think your tears would taste like alcohol right about now."

Money was infinite. But time was not. Had he gone to a place like the Debau Company, it would have been like living with a thousand woodpeckers. A good night's sleep would have eluded him forever.

He surely would not have been able to sit, holding Holo in his lap, staring at the fire in the hearth with nothing else to do. He would absolutely never be able to enjoy the changing of the seasons by seeing the color of the leaves in the forest, going out into the woods to forage for wild vegetables in the spring, mushrooms in the summer, or tree nuts in the autumn.

Instead, he would have gotten to indulge himself with the gourmet dishes that line the long dining tables of the Debau Company, but that would have only been fun at first.

He knew he would never get tired of a life with Holo.

Lawrence felt not even the slightest hint of regret over his choice. That was why he had no idea why Holo had been at the Debau Company for four days and why the dam on her old fears had collapsed.

Now he understood why she had gotten upset when he was filled with childlike excitement over the amount on the money order.

And then coming in on top of that was what he had just said about how the likes of a mere ex-merchant like him could do nothing when faced with the Laud Company and the odd makeup of this city.

Holo agonized over the fear that she was the very person who had stolen away the possibility for Lawrence to become a great merchant who could have solved any problem in an instant.

“You should probably give up your nickname of wisewolf,” he said with a dry smile, cradling Holo’s head in his arms, while she dug her nails into his hands. “Because you have no idea how happy I am.”

Holo froze, and she gulped in air as though she would start crying again.

Lawrence tousled Holo’s hair before pressing his head onto hers.

“And don’t you want to hear the rest of what I was about to say?”

“...?”

Holo looked up at Lawrence

like a toddler left alone in a wheat field.

“This isn’t something an ex–traveling merchant like me can deal with easily, but I have plenty of assets that I gained from our adventures.”

The grin he wore was a genuine one.

Lawrence had a plan in his head that excited him beyond belief.

“The very same adventures I went on with you. And in the end, I’m still here with you. What I’m going to do next is only possible *because* I chose you.”

Lawrence stood up in front of Holo.

“Besides, in business, just because something is big doesn’t mean it’s interesting.”

Lawrence extended his hand to Holo, and after a moment of hesitation, she grasped it.

“I’ll show you the magic of trade. You’ll at least get to see me in a new light.”

He then teasingly poked her cheek, and she finally gave him a smile, albeit a crooked one.

“...You fool.”

Lawrence smiled, pulled Holo along as he walked, then collected the villager who was waiting patiently for them a slight distance away to tell him his plans. He was to summon the bishop and the mayor, the people who held authority over the bishopric’s assets, to the church.

Though the villager was bewildered, he obediently followed Lawrence’s instructions, the man who had uncovered the mystery of trade in the city.

Lawrence then led Holo by the hand and headed for the center of town.

There was a magnificent church, and inside was their old acquaintance, Elsa.

She was the strongest female priest he knew.

“...Might I ask the secret to your perfect relationship?”

They entered the church and called for Elsa, who unusually greeted them with

a joke.

They had probably been gripping each other's hands tightly, which had made her say that.

"It is because you were present at our wedding."

Elsa donned an exasperated smile before asking what business Lawrence had at the church.

As he explained, her expression immediately changed, and she picked up the Church's ecclesiastical code book that sat alongside the scripture. She had apparently been talking with the Salonia bishop about what in the Church's authority might be useful for relieving the trouble in the city.

There, Lawrence's knowledge of trade and experience came into the mix.

When Elsa was finished listening to his plan, she asked a most reasonable question.

"...I understand the logic, but will it really go as you plan?"

Her question was likely also the bishop's question. A merchant had been arrested, an act believed to have been for the good of the city's economy, but which had thrown the city into even more confusion.

But Lawrence had absolute confidence.

If Elsa helped, then this would doubtlessly be solved.

"Please trust me. That is exactly what this town is missing."

The people from the Vallan Bishopric, who came a little later, stared at him blankly.

But it was hard to imagine that things would get better if they remained idle spectators.

Elsa made the decision.

"I'll trust you."

Lawrence went to shake her hand, but he remembered that Holo still had a grip on his.

He tried to pull his hand free, but Holo looked away in a huff and refused to let go.

“I would never take him from you.”

Elsa shot her a tired smile. Holo simply pouted even more in response.

“Let us go.”

To untangle what had become so tangled.

Together, they left the church.

Above them hung only a beautiful autumn sky.

After tracing the transactions, they had discovered that no one was able to pay, and everyone was suffering.

It had seemed like someone had to be at fault, but no one was.

“That is why there is no swindler to be found. Please believe me. I will erase all the Laud Company’s debts in such a way that the Vallan Bishopric does not lose a single copper of their fortune.”

No matter what Elsa said, the money from the mountain sale to the Debau Company belonged to the Vallan Bishopric. They would of course need a decision made by the people of the bishopric if they were to use it, but they hesitated, as was to be expected.

That was because Lawrence suggested taking on the Laud Company’s debt for them.

“You say that, but...”

What Lawrence was talking about was strange. He was boasting that he would take on the Laud Company’s debt with the money from the mountain sale and recover the costs without a single loss.

But they eventually gave in. That was likely due to a combination of Elsa’s endless lectures and, more importantly, Laud’s promise of “I’ll pay this back without fail.”

They would continue to be longtime associates after this, after all.

“Now, then.”

Lawrence took a group that included Elsa, the bishop of Salonia, and ten others for a bluff and headed for the brewers' association. They had sold alcohol to the Laud Company but were now in financial distress because they had not received payment. There, he presented to them the Debau Company's money order.

"I will pay off the Laud Company's debt with this money order."

The brewers' association president blinked in amazement at the sight of the Debau Company's motto and the massive amount of money written on the money order.



Since members of the Church had also marched in, the president had for certain thought he would be thrown into jail, but on the contrary, they had offered to pay a debt. Of course he would be confused.

“I—I, uh, I appreciate it, but...”

What is he planning?

With a smile, Lawrence said, “There is only one condition for me leaving this money with you: There is another debt we ask that you pay off with the amount you’ve collected on this debt.”

The association president stared blankly at him, but if he could have his loan paid back, then it was not entirely terrible since ultimately their debts would get lighter. Even though there was a condition for taking payment, a staunch clergywoman was standing before him and even the bishop who had thrown a merchant in jail not too long ago.

There was no way he could refuse.

“U-understood...”

Lawrence nodded at his response, then Elsa, who was well versed in both numbers and faith, had taken care of the procedures. After leaving someone behind to watch over the money order, they headed to the next place. Several people from the brewers’ association tagged along, wanting to see this strange procession to the end.

At the next place they visited, the woodworkers’ union, the fierce-looking woodworkers were of course taken aback by the sudden appearance of a crowd and their proposed idea, but they ultimately also agreed to the proposal with puzzled looks. In exchange for taking the payment for the barrels from the brewers’ association, they would pay forward the money to clear their own debts.

Several of the woodworkers then joined the group, and they all headed toward the Hay and Scythe. When they found the lumber merchant who Lawrence had talked to, they first had to calm him down as he immediately fell into a fit of despair that the time for him to be arrested had finally come. Then they had him call the other lumber merchants over. They coordinated the

merchants' debts and paid them off, arranged all the debts they had and put them together, then urged them to pay those off at the next place. As the group headed to the next place, the lumber merchants of course came along.

At the inns association, the association president welcomed Lawrence and the bunch with an expression as though he had seen a dragon in broad daylight, then agreed to the condition of paying the Laud Company after receiving payment for his loan.

And when they left, of course, people from the inns association came along as well.

When their group, now swollen in numbers, made their way to the Laud Company, Laud himself waited restlessly for them with his subordinates under the eaves of the building.

When Lawrence returned with a whole mass of city folk in tow, Laud practically jumped.

“And the results?!”

Elsa showed him the parchment with payment from the inns association written on it, and Laud gave her a powerful hug.

And once Laud visited the brewers' association again, the circle would finally be closed.

“...Oh, God...!” the brewers' association president murmured, as though he had just seen a miracle.

The Laud Company, who had been paid by the inns association, took the payment and headed toward the brewers' association.

They then handed the association president just enough money to cover their debts and then took back the money order from the Debau Company that Lawrence had left with them. Now the Laud Company had no more debt.

And yet, not a single bronze coin had vanished from or entered into Lawrence's possession.

A veil of silence fell over them at the sight.

It was Lawrence who spoke first.

“As you can see, there are no extra gold coins, and there are no fewer gold coins. Everything started with this money order, and pen and ink have paid everything off—” He looked around at everyone standing there. “Under God’s protection, everyone’s loans have vanished without a trace!”

There was an immediate ear-piercing cheer, and their stamping feet caused the association building itself to shake. Everyone was overflowing with unexpected delight, lifting up all those present. Whether it was the bishop of Salonia or Elsa, they all sang praises for God’s greatness. Among the commotion, only Holo stood alone.

But it was not from sadness but because she was a wolf dumfounded that she had been deceived by a fox.

“What do you think? It’s a merchant’s magic.”

Holo snapped back to reality, then narrowed her eyes as though she was trying to spot her prey in the mist.

“...I do not understand it in the least...”

Lawrence shrugged, thought for a moment, then said, “Think of a crossroads.”

“...Hrm?”

“There’s a long cart train coming from each of the four roads. They’re all hurrying, so none of them are paying attention to their surroundings.”

Holo looked around, then popped her chin up, asking what happened next.

“It’d be obvious in a drawing, but any cart that enters the intersection would be blocked by a cart in front of it and wouldn’t be able to go any farther. And if you look back, then somebody else’s cart would be blocking the road while the driver yells foul things at you.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And as more and more carts and travelers arrive, most would simply give up on ever getting out, right?”

“...And that was the situation in this city?”

Lawrence nodded.

“Something *can* be done, actually. If everyone moves back bit by bit to create a gap, then uses those gaps effectively to make another gap, then it can all be untangled. But when it comes to money, you can’t trust anyone else, and it’s difficult to get a bird’s-eye view of a situation that’s like a tangled intersection. Even if you were the only one to trust someone else and paid your loan, you just can’t help but think that money would be used to pay someone unrelated, then just vanish into thin air.”

And so it was natural that most would only focus on someone else paying what was owed to them instead of paying their own debts.

“The only person who could resolve the confusion would be someone from the window of an inn at the corner yelling orders like, *You go that way, you come this way*. In the world of business, the only person who can take on that job...” Lawrence pinched Holo’s little nose. “...is a traveling merchant who makes his living on foot and understands how big and complicated the world is.”

Holo stared at Lawrence, her nose still pinched.

“What? Are you going to say that it’s your fault again that I only ever got to be a bathhouse owner in a place far away from everything else?” Lawrence let go of Holo’s nose and continued. “I settled down in a bathhouse and indulge you because I wanted to. If I put my mind to it, I could use magic whenever I want to, though.”

Holo squinted, her lips trembling as though she was going to cry.

But what spilled across her face was not tears but an exasperated smile.

“You fool.”

Lawrence raised his shoulders in a tired shrug, then wiped away the tears pooling at the corners of Holo’s eyes with a finger.

He was doing it because Holo seemed so happy, and he wondered if Elsa would make another comment if she saw them.

And speaking of the devil—or a saint, more like—Elsa appeared.

“Oh, Mr. Lawrence, come quickly!”

“Huh?”

The jostled Elsa’s bun had come loose and her cheeks were red, but she gripped a bundle of bonds in her hand.

“There are still plenty of debt circles left in this city! And there are so many petitioners asking if theirs can be solved the same way! Come now—hurry!”

Elsa grabbed Lawrence’s hand, but this time, Holo did not hold them back.

“What, you’re not stopping us?” Lawrence asked deliberately, and Holo shrugged happily.

“No need.”

Then, with light wolf steps, she came to stand beside him.

“I shall always be by your side.”

That was the way it had been ever since they met.

And that was how it would be ever after.

Lawrence smiled, and so did Holo.

From heaven, the commotion in Salonia must have seemed a trivial incident.

But Lawrence knew he held nothing less than a treasure in his arms.

“Holo.”

He called her name, and Holo blinked.

It only took a moment for the sometimes-lonely wolf to break into a beaming smile.

A
WEDDING
FOR
WOLVES



A WEDDING FOR WOLVES

When I was young, I left the village that was my birthplace with the hopes of mastering theology. I made my way toward a university town with no money or connections and lived as a homeless wandering student. I was laughably unprepared, and sure enough, I found myself in a dire situation of my own making, but it was by God's graces that I met the people I could call my life mentors, and it is all thanks to them I was able to get this far.

Ever since then, I have worked extremely hard, and I never planned to neglect my teachings.

And even if not everything was perfect, there were genuine signs of progress.

So while I had not exactly bided my time waiting for the moment, I did leave the hot spring village of Nyohhira to venture on a journey when the opportunity presented itself. That was two months ago.

Problems surrounding the Church have brought chaos to the world, and my journey was met with difficulties and tribulations almost right away. Even so, I managed to safely get through it all with God's protection, and I was even bestowed with an unexpected reputation. While I have found myself rather bewildered and pressured by such unwarranted regard, I have finally started to be able to carry the responsibility on these meager shoulders.

All I must do now is simply follow the path of faith while restraining and cultivating myself.

My name is Tote Col.

I am but another lamb following in God's path as best I can, but...

"Gh..."

I felt a weight on my chest and opened my eyes.

I wondered if a demon had finally appeared to test my faith, so I opened my

eyes slightly, ready to greet it with all the piety I had accumulated over the years. The intruder's outline was illuminated by the faint light of dawn that filtered in through the window.

A moment later, my shoulders relaxed.

There before my eyes was, in a sense, a demon meant to lead astray a lamb of God. What lay on my chest, snoring soundly, was a young girl.

When she frolicked and tramped about in a good mood, due to her slender physique and high waist, she was like an adorable ball of cotton or wafting dandelion fluff, but when she lay on my chest, I was painfully aware of how much she had grown. It had been indescribably sweet when she had done this as a babbling baby, but there was a difficult-to-describe weight when she did this now.

She never listened, and no matter how many times I cautioned her, she incorrigibly crawled under my covers during the night. When I looked at Myuri's sleeping face, I sighed through my nose.

This was the only daughter of ex-merchant Lawrence and Holo the Wisewolf, the couple to whom I owed a great debt of gratitude, and she was essentially the little sister I had cared for since birth. The tomboyish Myuri had constantly whined about wanting to leave her hometown to see the outside world and had followed along on my journey without my permission.

Her ash-silver bangs, a remarkable color she had inherited from her father, swayed, and her long eyelashes twitched. She mumbled something or other in her sleep, and like a cat changing its sleeping position, she curled up and tried to bury her face in the blanket.

I found myself moved by the innocence of that endearing gesture and smiled, but then something suddenly struck me.

Since her face was now in the blanket, the top of her head was right at the top of my nose. Her vaunted hair, which she cared for every single day, smelled of a strange sweetness that was different from perfumed oil.

It was because of the large triangular wolf ears at the top of her head.

Myuri was a girl who had inherited the blood of a wolf, and she had

magnificent wolf ears and tail. There were times the tips of her ears would tickle my nose and wake me up, but as I watched her ears comfortably twitch in time with her breathing, I gulped.

This sweet girl had adorable wolf ears, and she slept soundly without a single worry. I swallowed hard at the sight...I actually did not, but I did desperately hold back a yell as a terrifying realization dawned upon me.

“Oh no.”

I threw the blanket back, and on my chest, Myuri curled up even tighter. In response, her wolf’s tail swished about unhappily, looking even more fluffy than usual as it glittered under the light cascading through the window.

To be precise, it was the countless hairs that had fallen from her tail, dancing in the air, that caught the morning’s light.

“...Oh, God...”

I returned my raised head back to my pillow and stared up weakly at the ceiling. Combined with how Myuri’s hairs were the color of silver flecked with ash, they looked just like snow as they danced in the sunlight. One could call it a beautiful sight, but the world was not filled with beauty alone.

“Myuri, Myuri.”

The girl in question was seeking the blanket, leisurely stirring. I grabbed her shoulders and shook, and this sleepyhead flattened her ears in annoyance, swatting my hands with her tail, and silver hairs flew with each and every move.

“Myuri.”

“Rrrgh...It’s still early, Brother...”

As Myuri tried to pull the blanket she had finally gotten a hold of back over her head as she said that, I demanded, “Clean up your hairs right this instant!”

Myuri was a girl with wolf’s blood running in her veins. Shedding season had come again this year, but this was not her parents’ bathhouse in Nyohhira. We were in the middle of traveling, and what’s more, we were currently staying in a rented room in a noble’s manor.

We could not let anyone know that Myuri was a wolf.

“Bwuh?”

With sleepy eyes, she raised her head, and a hair must have gotten in her nose, because she sneezed.

It was easy enough to wipe down the floor and table, but when it came to the blankets and other sundries, our only options were to either beat them out or tediously pick the hairs off. It would be clearly strange if a guest took their blanket to the well to wash it out, and we would need some sort of reason. When I proposed the idea that she put on a little act to manufacture a reason for washing the blanket, she glared at me with a reddened face and a fierce look in her eyes.

“I’m grown up already, so I wouldn’t do something like that!”

It was not very convincing to hear her call herself grown up when she still acted like a spoiled child on a regular basis, but she was so angry about my initial plan, it was clear that claiming she had had an accident would not be an option.

And so together, we sat beside the window and worked.

“*Sigh...*I had not thought about this time of year at all...I am certain Mr. Lawrence must have his hands full back at the bathhouse right about now...”

Myuri’s mother, Holo the Wisewolf, could not easily hide her ears and tail like Myuri.

She would be cooped up in a room at this time of year in order to keep wolf hairs from floating everywhere.

But the bathhouse was familiar territory, so they could soak in the springs at night, out of sight. That was why, since Myuri could deftly put her ears and tail away at will, I had scarcely paid any mind to her shedding season.

On the road, the shedding season took on an entirely different character.

“Uuurgh...My fingers are tired...”

Myuri whined, but those who had the blood of beasts were considered to have been possessed by demons and ran the risk of being immediately burned at the stake if discovered, especially by someone from the Church. That thought

alone made me willing to face any hardship.

“Hey, Brother?”

Myuri had languidly given up on the blanket over her lap, and I was about to ask her to cut the chatter and continue working.

“What if we got a stray dog the same color of fur as me? Wouldn’t that solve this?”

“What? What are you—?” I started, then stopped.

“No matter how much I wash my tail, I just can’t hide it this time of year. And I’m not confident that I can totally hide my ears and tail while I’m sleeping.”

Myuri could freely tuck away her ears and tail, but it apparently felt more natural for her to have them out. That was why they would pop out on their own when she was surprised or angry.

It was much the same when she slept, which meant that if we were going to otherwise repeat this process every day, then her idea was at least worth looking into.

“If I play up the innocent little girl angle, I could probably manage bringing just one stray puppy into the manor. I’m sure they won’t get mad at me.”

She spoke with such a calm expression, but I could easily imagine her cradling a puppy and putting on a sly act. While I was not too happy about it as her adoptive older brother, she was strangely skilled at things like this. Her mother, Holo the Wisewolf, also used her dignity, charm, and wiles to freely direct, control, and drive her husband Lawrence, so Myuri must have inherited that part of her.

Also, the job of picking hairs off the blanket was never-ending.

“...But what are the chances of finding such a convenient puppy?” I asked, and Myuri threw off the blanket and stood.

“We just have to go looking around town! It’s so nice out today anyway!”

Could that have been her goal to begin with...? I thought, but in an unusual turn of events, we had nothing planned for the day.

We had been busy for quite a while until just recently, and the stormy workdays would come again in a few days' time.

I had not been able to spend much time with Myuri recently, which was part of the reason I relented when she crawled into the blanket like an infant, begging for attention. She must have been lonely.

"I suppose we can."

Myuri's eyes immediately glittered, and she grabbed her coat.

"Yay! I'll get grilled meat, fried food, and sugared candies from the stalls!"

I sighed as she listed off treats like the unnerving chant for a spell, then stood and threw my own coat over my shoulders. It was already spring, and I figured I might not need this for much longer. Myuri's good mood was certainly thanks to the warm weather. The long, harsh winter was coming to an end, and the seasons of plenty fast approaching.

I squinted and looked out the window to see an endless pure-blue sky.

"Come on, Brother! Let's go!"

Myuri grabbed me and pulled me by the arm, and I stumbled forward.

A graceful young woman looking up at the sky, smiling at the changing of seasons.

A part of me wanted her to grow up like that, but perhaps the way she was now, so full of life and energy, was just right. And the most formidable part of her was that if she wanted to act like a proper young lady, she could absolutely do it when she had a mind to.

"Hmm? What is it?"

Myuri, clinging to my right arm, looked up blankly at me.

"It is nothing."

I patted her head with my left hand. After a brief moment passed, she shrugged and gave me a happy look.

"But the limit is one stick of grilled meat, understood?"

"Awww!"

“No ‘awww’s about it.”

“Fine, then I’ll go to a shop that has skewers thiiiiiiiis big!”

She threw out her arms like she was going to dislocate her shoulder, then clamped back down on my arm like a shark shutting its jaws.

“You promised, right?”

“No such thing exists. Oh, and metal spits don’t count. We are talking about wooden skewers.”

“You’re so mean, Brother!”

Though she whined, Myuri rubbed her face against my arm as she smiled, enjoying herself.

A fun yet aggravating or perhaps just a regular day was about to begin.

We were staying in a noble’s manor in a city called Rausbourne located in the south of the Winfiel Kingdom. The royal Hyland, who was helping us on our travels, was borrowing it from a certain noble, and so we were renting a room while carrying out jobs at Hyland’s request. Today, Hyland was out on official business, which made it our first day of rest in a long while.

Once she returned, our taxing work would surely begin anew.

Even the manor, which had seen a flurry of people coming and going for the past two days, was incredibly quiet for our well-earned rest.

We told the servants remaining in the manor that we were heading out and promptly set off. Just in case, I asked that no one go into our room since there were some important documents that I was in the middle of writing left in there. It was not a lie that there were such documents, so God might overlook my deceptions.

Once we left the manor, the late-morning Rausbourne streets were the same as always. It was not long ago that things were chaotic, like a great fire had swept through the city in the middle of a storm, yet normalcy had fully returned to the town.

We made our way through the nobles’ quarter, passing elegant horse-drawn covered carriages, and came to the bustling downtown area. Just as a cage

stuffed full of chickens and ducks passed us, a cart filled to the brim with pigs and a herd of cattle fastened together by a yoke trundled by. I felt dizzy thinking about how many people's plates that could possibly fill, but in order to fill the stomachs of those who had endured salt-cured meat and herring and old, flavorless bread throughout the winter, I figured that might not be enough.

Once I was finished praying for God to watch over the people and their livelihoods, Myuri, who had been crouching beside me, stood up.

"Okay, thanks. My brother will buy you a treat, okay?"

Responding to what Myuri said was a rather miserable-looking old dog with fur the color of burnt umber.

"*Ruff*," he barked weakly, then sluggishly walked on the edge of the road. There were three other stray dogs of different colors sitting at Myuri's feet; as one who had inherited the blood of wolves, the creatures recognized by all as the kings of the forests, the moment Myuri stepped onto the streets, stray dogs began to follow her.

Additionally, the reason all their fur looked so wild was because just like Myuri, they were likely in the middle of their shedding season, too. I had a feeling that if we managed to find a dog with the same color coat as her, then we would have little trouble fooling everyone else.

"Will we be able to find one?"

"Hmm, there aren't any that have the same nice fur as me, but there's a place where some that have a similar color gather, so he's going to check it out."



I did not quite understand the norms of stray dogs; perhaps it was a habit of theirs to band together with those who looked alike.

“See, there’s a lot of boats that come here, right? The people who come to live here from all different places on those boats tend to live with others who hail from the same homeland.”

She was referring to the cantons and ethnic enclaves that could always be found in large cities, and that was when it clicked.

“Then the dogs who have been brought from their homelands must congregate in the same places.”

“Yeah. Like all these little ones here came from the eastern part of the mainland.”

Though they were of different colors, their body shape did look somewhat similar.

They each wagged their tail happily whenever Myuri patted them on the head.

“And so that dog earlier is on his way to an area where silver dogs gather?”

“Probably. But their fur isn’t gonna be as good as mine.”

Myuri devoted herself to caring for her hair, but that dedication didn’t quite extend to her fur.

She did seem to still have quite a bit of pride in it, however, as she placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest.

“Okay, Brother, while that old dog is collecting the puppies we need, let’s go buy him a treat!”

“Yes, yes. And we’ll naturally be buying one for the wolf who commands all the stray dogs as well, right?”

“Eh-heh-heh.”

Myuri grinned mischievously and I smiled wryly in turn as we joined the flow of the crowded streets.

Rausbourne had always been a large and lively harbor city, but in the areas

closest to the port, the crowds became so great that it almost made me think of a giant tub scooping people out of the sea and splashing them with wild abandon onto the streets.

The region's northwesterly cold and damp winter wind hampered sea voyages, so ships were swarming the place since spring was finally about to arrive in full.

"Myuri, stay close to me!"

"I was about to say that to you!"

The short and light Myuri hopped out of the way of a stout dockworker, who carried a massive load and would certainly not let it go lightly if she were to run into him; then she dodged a group of portly men who talked trade in loud voices, and she looked on in amusement at a herdsman who carried a sheep on his shoulders, all while she kept forging ahead, picking out the stalls that crowded each side of the road.

The thought that if she fell in this crowd, she would immediately be trampled and would suffer grave injuries made me feel uneasy, but I was the one being yelled at for being in the way by the dockworker, arrogantly pushed out of the way by the merchants, and thwacked in the face by the tail of the sheep resting on the herdsman's back.

I dizzily followed after Myuri, only to find her in the middle of shopping at a stall.

"Brother, your hair's a mess."

"..."

With a cool face, she pulled a wooden spoon out from her waist sash and chewed on it as she waited for her food from the stall.

"That biting habit of yours is terrible manners."

I did my best to admonish her, but as she bit on the spoon like a puppy with irritated teeth, she stuck out her tongue, then went to retrieve her food when the stall owner called out to her.

"...What is that?"

I had been a wandering student when I was little and spent a long time in many lands helping Myuri's father, the traveling merchant Lawrence. Later on, I toured even more places through Elsa's connections in order to advance my theology studies.

I was proud that I had seen a considerable share of the world. And yet, the food that Myuri had received with a gleeful look was an odd item I had never seen before.

"Eh-heh-heh. The stonemason who came to the mansion told me about this! It's really popular in Rausbourne right now—it's called a pirate bowl!"

Myuri held a mess of a stir-fry in a bowl made out of hard, cheap bread.

"This is pig's and sheep's intestines. And these are soft joint bones. It's amazing! You fry them all together; then you add fish bones that've been deep-fried in oil, shake a bunch of salt over it, then put a ton of garlic and mustard and spices on top; then you put it in oil again to fry it—"

As Myuri explained, the intense smell of garlic wafted from her hands, and it actually made my eyes sting. It was certainly a gem that someone who did a lot of hard labor, like a stonemason, would enjoy; Myuri stuck in her spoon and took a bite, then squeezed her eyes shut so hard I thought her ears and tail might pop out at any moment to whip back and forth. She began to concentrate on mixing it all together.

There was no trace of good etiquette in her behavior, but I had to admit I enjoyed watching her stick her face into the bread bowl, enraptured by her meal. My scolding transformed into a sigh, and I dragged her by the sleeve to an empty alleyway and made her sit on a crate so that she would at least sit while eating.

Myuri mixed this well-seasoned pirate bowl with her constant traveling companion, the wooden spoon, and sometimes bit into the crunchy bread bowl.

"Haum, num...Gulp. Phew. You want some, Brother?"

After she had devoured almost half of it, Myuri finally offered some, as though the thought had only just occurred to her. I smiled at that part of her

and took a piece of the bread bowl and had her put a spoonful of the mix on top. I was cautious of eating meat, but I felt a bit of hesitation for an entirely different reason as well.

Still, it was filled with tantalizing flavors and dangerous appeal. I took it all in with a single bite, and the inside of my mouth exploded, an intense shock that almost numbed the area from my temples to the top of my head.

“Gives you energy, doesn’t it?”

Contrary to Myuri, who bared her canines as she grinned, I chewed my food, just barely keeping down a cough from the spice, and somehow managed to swallow it. There was still a commotion in my mouth, but it was not a terrible thing. Instead, I swallowed, craving more, but I had a feeling this was something not meant to be eaten on its own.

“I almost want ale with it...”

“Me too!”

Myuri had interjected in response to my absentminded murmurings.

I glared at her in annoyance, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

She then started moving her hands about busily, so I could not keep myself from scolding her, “Eat a little more slowly.”

Myuri, munching on the intestines, said, “It’s ’cause the spoon is so small.”

Out of spite, she opened up her mouth and held the wooden spoon beside it.

It was a utensil that anyone brought with them when they went on the road, and the most ostentatious merchants would stick their silver spoons in their hats.

“This one’s all scruffy and worn out now. I want a new one.”

“That is because you cannot wean yourself off that biting habit. Or do you want a metal spoon?”

“Hiss!”

Since she was a wolf, she had a strong distaste for metal. As we conversed, a nearby stray dog spotted her and brought over a number of its companions

from seemingly out of nowhere. It appeared to be that they both admired the wolf she was and that they had been lured in by the good smell of the food that she had in her hands.

“None for you,” Myuri said, cradling the pirate bowl in her arms, so I poked her in the head.

The scripture asked us to share freely, and the stray dogs in the city had helped us through the commotion we had gotten wrapped up in just a few days ago, so we should have been giving them our thanks.

But that made Myuri even more discontent.

“Boo...I mean, they can snatch up their own food by themselves. Hunters don’t need handouts...,” Myuri muttered as she scooped up another spoonful, stared at it regretfully, then placed it by her feet. The stray dogs’ tails wagged so hard I was almost worried they might come off as they bit into the morsel and started fighting over it.

“Well, a long time ago, when I was traveling, I had my food stolen plenty of times by stray dogs.”

When I brought it up, Myuri, who was gnawing at her spoon again, stared in surprise at me before smiling impishly.

“That’s ’cause you’re always staring into thin air, looking at nothing and lost in thought.”

“I cannot deny that.”

Myuri grinned with glee, and just as she was about to start on the offal again, her eyes went round. I followed her gaze, wondering what it might be, and in the middle of a meandering throng of people who were clearly wearing travelers’ garb, I spotted some strange articles on their back.

“Brother, what is that?! It’s some big utensil!”

The hand that gripped the wooden spoon tugged on my sleeve. I panicked that my borrowed outfit might get dirty, but Myuri paid no mind.

“That’s...”

There were all sorts of travelers’ garb, and the group going past was wearing

a kind that was not commonly seen in this area.

The way they seemed indescribably stylish and the confidence in their stride made me think that they hailed from a city in the south. One of their number carried a bundle of massive eating utensils.

“I wonder...if they might use it in a dining hall somewhere in town.”

There was a spoon the length of an adult’s arm and a forked wooden spear perhaps meant to skewer chunks of beef. There were also several others in shapes I was not familiar with.

“Whoa, but why do travelers have them? I guess they’re gonna open a store here,” Myuri said, chewing on her wooden spoon.

“They must have come from the south to visit a manor around here. Look—they are also carrying furniture.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right.”

Myuri watched the group with interest, and the moment she stuffed what remained of the pirate bowl in her mouth, she suddenly said, “I want that spoon! I could eat tons of food with it, and I could use it as a weapon if push came to shove. Wouldn’t that be cool?”

It was certainly large enough that if Myuri was to hold it, the oversize utensil would make her look vaguely like a young man carrying a longsword. It would most certainly suit her, but I was not sure what would happen to our food budget if she ate with that.

“No. You would say *just a spoonful* and take out that massive thing whenever we buy food, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah. A skewer the size of a clothespole would be a grilled meat free-for-all!”

It seemed she still held a grudge about the limit of one skewer.

“That is all you ever think about, isn’t it...?”

“Oh, c’mon—Wouldn’t it be great to have one? I’d be able to eat so much delicious food with it.”

When I thought about how she could sometimes be just as calm and

composed as an adult, there were also times when she showed a childishness that I had trouble understanding. I sighed in defeat, thinking about how such a big utensil would be so inconvenient during mealtimes.

That was when three pairs of eyes looked up at Myuri, who was still gazing greedily at the passing group. They were several stray dogs that made their base in the Rausbourne port, loyal servants to the wolf. The intelligent, submissive creatures followed her gaze, and they all started to lower themselves.

The hunters were about to lend a hand to their master!

“Myuri, Myuri.”

“Wha—?”

I tapped Myuri on the shoulder and pointed at the dogs, and she also seemed to understand the situation.

She thought for a moment before saying with delight, “Okay, you three, I guess you’ll be working for that portion of pirate bowl I gave you, huh?”

The dogs turned back toward Myuri, their tails wagging.

“Hey, Myuri!”

Myuri gave a dramatic “Eep!” and shrunk, then smiled with glee.

“Honestly, I swear...”

“But isn’t it cool? A female bandit leader who commands stray dogs? A vigilante who only steals from evildoers? I think it’d be popular if we performed that as a play at the bathhouse.”

It suited her so much that I could easily imagine her doing exactly that.

Other girls her age would be at the time in their lives when they would begin learning needlework and cooking in preparation for marriage, studying how to act ladylike and becoming able to read at least one poem, but Myuri was as tomboyish as she had ever been.

“Listen up, all of you, don’t go stealing around town. The only things you can take are things from bad people.”

She smacked the hard bread with her wooden spoon, talking like she was some vigilante leader.

The dogs obediently sat down and lay on their stomachs in disappointment.

“Sigh...”

I wondered when it was that she would grow up.

As I heaved another tired sigh, the old dog from earlier came plodding happily toward us.

“Oh, you’re back already. How’d it go?”

“Wuff.”

The old dog gave a bark that sounded like a sigh, and Myuri’s eyes darted around, her mouth twisting.

“What does that mean?”

“Borf...Rrr...”

After something that sounded like a timid growl, its tail swayed. Myuri bit into her wooden spoon again before taking one, then another bite of the pirate bowl, tearing off another piece of the bread bowl, then placing the rest before the dog’s nose.

“Let’s go, Brother.”

“Huh? To where?”

Myuri stepped over the old dog, happily eating the rest of the pirate bowl, and the other dogs, who were only left with the scraps, and headed deeper into the alley.

She turned around and said, “Somebody’s hunting dogs.”

What?

I stared at her blankly, but what she said next startled me.

“And they’re only after dogs with silver or white coats. There might be someone else in this city with the same goals as me.”

“Impossible,” I unconsciously let slip, but I quickly realized that was not

necessarily true.

There were so many people milling about, and ships from all over were packed inside the harbor. Few nonhumans lived in towns and villages among humans, but they certainly existed. Myuri was a perfect example of that, so it was not entirely impossible.

“But then why the rush? If they have the same goal as you, then why not share and cooperate?”

Myuri then widened her eyes and flashed her canines.

“This is my territory! Mother taught me! She said, *‘If you cannot maintain your territory, then what good are you as a wolf?!’*”

“...”

“And it’s possible that they could be the opposite of what you think, and they could be bad people! Come on! Or I’m leaving you behind!”

Myuri did not wait for my response and set off with long strides—her wolf ears had appeared on top of her head, and her tail was already peeking out from under her coat. Befitting for the big city that it was, Rausbourne had plenty of stray animals, which included dogs. Myuri, and the blood of the ruler of the forests that flowed through her veins, had immediately won them over, so her claim that the city was her territory was not much of an exaggeration.

“Brother!” Myuri yelled as she practically vanished down the alleyway, so without much other choice, I began to walk when I noticed the old dog, lapping up the pirate’s bowl, looking at me.

Its apologetic eyes seemed to impart, “It is not my fault.” I let my shoulders fall and sighed.

“That girl has been unruly since birth.”

“Wuff.”

Perhaps a flame had been lit in her wolf’s blood since she had conquered the stray dogs of a big city. As this was rather different from her usual tomboyishness, I decided it would be a poor idea to admonish her without at least hearing her out first.

“Honestly,” I murmured and chased after Myuri.

Floating in her wake as she ran were glittering silver wolf hairs.

Rausbourne was an old city and had many twisting alleyways. I would have gotten lost a long time ago, but they posed little challenge for Myuri, who was a wolf who would not get lost even in the thickest of forests.

She proceeded to the right, then to the left with confident strides, and I eventually realized we had come to a part of town with a familiar atmosphere.

“*Huff, puff...* Hey, Myuri, could we be near the manor?” I asked, my shoulders heaving with every breath, and Myuri shrugged, her ears flicking about.

“We’re in a totally different place. It does feel the same, though.”

There were apparently several districts where nobles had their manors.

“And...the air smells different here. I think people from some faraway country gather in this area, and the rich ones built their houses on this corner.”

I, of course, could not taste the air so keenly, so I trusted Myuri’s nose.

“There are no strays here. Dog hunting, was it?”

“The old dog said that starting a few days ago, some of the other dogs have been captured.”

“That’s...”

Dog hunting in a large metropolis narrowed the possibilities. They could have been pulled off the streets in an attempt to clean up in preparation for an impending visit by a king or some other important person. They also could have been captured for their furs. In wartime, they could have been hunted either to reduce the mouths that needed feeding or for food.

“I had a bad feeling about it, too, but...now that we’re here, something feels off.”

“What do you mean?”

Myuri poked her head from out of the alley and observed the street, then closed her eyes and sniffed.

“There’s no hint of violence at all. No poisoned treats or bloodstains like

they'd been beaten with sticks."

It certainly was a peaceful street.

"Then what could it be?"

"Hrmmm...Hmm?" Myuri's nose twitched, and she strained to listen. "... Brother, this way."

As she was about to step out from the alley and into the main street, I grabbed her arm.

"Ears and tail."

With a surprised look on her face, she shivered, and her ears and tail vanished.

"Be careful that you don't end up hunted, too."

"But you'd come and save me if that happened, right?" she shot back with an unabashed smile, and I could not bring myself to be angry with her for it.

I gave her nothing but a pat on the head in response, and after she contentedly drew up her shoulders, she started walking.

"Well, what is it? It seems like you've learned something."

"Mm...I guess I have learned something, but I just have more questions now." Leading the way, Myuri turned to look back at me over her shoulder. "Everyone's been gathered in one place. But it wasn't by force. If it was, then it'd smell like, you know...sweat or anger, but it doesn't."

"They're all in one place...? And in a place like this?"

It was a quiet district with rows of elegant houses. If someone did something so eccentric as collecting stray dogs, then it would not be long before they got a bad reputation, and that would make it difficult to live there. That was to say nothing of collecting dogs to take their fur—there were plenty of places more suited for that.

"I thought about going back to a wolf if they were all in trouble, but I'm glad there's no need to worry about that for now, at least."

Myuri suddenly brought that up, and I felt a slight pang in my chest.

She was selfish and rambunctious, but she had generally grown into a kind girl.

I inadvertently patted her head from behind her, and with a start, she asked, “Huh? Wh-what’s that for?”

After that, I followed Myuri as she led the way, and what we came to was a building with a magnificent iron gate in front of it. It was four stories high and made of red brick, and judging by the metallic fittings on the walls meant for banners and torches, I could tell that someone of considerable standing lived there.

There were no doors facing the street, but instead there was a metal gate beneath a suspended walkway. It was made in a way that passing through it would lead one to the inner courtyard.

And once we had come this far, even I could tell where the dogs were. They were on the other side of the building, inside the courtyard.

“They sound like they’re having fun.”

When I strained my ears, I could make out the faint sounds of dogs barking and, for some reason, someone playing an instrument. Though nobles often had odd hobbies, collecting dogs to play music for them was certainly not a common one.

It was then that Myuri tried to get a closer look through the gaps in the metal gate.

A voice suddenly cried out above us.

“Ohhh! I’m so sick of waiting!”

I panicked—we had no excuse if we were thought to be beggars at best or burglars at worst as we clung to the gates of the house of someone with high standing, but...there was something that caught my attention.

Did they say they were sick of waiting?

Either way, I looked up to see a young man leaning out an open window, peering down at us. I could even call him a boy—he was younger than me and perhaps only a few years older than Myuri. His dirty-blond hair rustled in the

air, the very image of upper-class refinement.

Not only that, but his clothes were rather gaudy and seemed somewhat ceremonial, like the sort of thing Hyland might wear on official business.

“I’m so glad you made it! I’ll get someone to come right away, so just wait there! We are saved. Thanks be to God!”

The way he smiled in relief made him seem like just another innocent boy. The slight flush to his pale skin was a little too picture-perfect.

But it was clear that the boy was having some misconceptions, so I opened my mouth to correct him, but by then he had already pulled back behind the window.

“...I feel like he has the wrong idea about us...”

Luckily, it did not seem as though he had mistaken us for burglars, but I wondered what he *did* think we were.

Myuri wore her usual outfit that she had brought from Nyohhira, and I wore clothes borrowed from Hyland that made me seem like a young master of a big commercial company. My usual clothes were much too clergy-like, which stood out terribly in this city. Against my own inclination, I had, at some point, become famous here.

That is why, while I figured I could obscure myself if we ran right now, I was held back by the fear that I might see this person again somewhere because of their high standing. Carefully explaining our situation now might help us avoid trouble in the future.

However, how should we explain that we were chasing after white-haired dogs?

As I groaned, I realized Myuri was looking at me.

“What is it?”

Myuri, her mother’s red eyes staring straight at me, blinked so hard they almost made sound, then beamed.

“I was just thinking how much more handsome you are, Brother.”

“U-uhhh...?”

She then gleefully clung to my arm. There were times I simply did not understand her, and I thought about how there was nothing more unknowable in this world than a girl’s heart.

As this happened, I sensed someone on the other side of the gate.

I had barely even started thinking of an excuse before the gate opened.

The noble from earlier appeared before us, his cheeks flushed, but someone of such high standing breathlessly opening the door for a guest was too great a breach of protocol, so his servants, flustered, rushed in behind him.

Not even a moment after he opened the door, he grasped my hand and began to shake it up and down, practically jumping himself.

“Oh, I’m so relieved. Truly relieved! You have my thanks!”

“Ah, um—”

“How marvelous this is! You are both perfect, exactly what I asked for! I can’t believe I scored such wonderful people like you!”

Exactly what he asked for? I wondered what he might be talking about when he then took Myuri’s hand, kneeling reverently in greeting.

“I cannot think of this as anything but a divine miracle, having someone with such beautiful hair like this coming here. I am very much looking forward to this.”

In the noble style, he raised the back of her hand and mimed giving it a kiss. Myuri absolutely loved that sort of thing, and she was innocently overjoyed to have her vaunted hair complimented so.

“Come inside, come inside. We must get ready quickly. Everyone was just about ready to give up. I am so, so relieved!”

I felt somewhat guilty for this—he was practically on the verge of tears, but I had no idea what he was mistaking us for. I had to say something before we went inside.

“I am sorry...May I ask who you might be mistaking us for?”

“Huh?”

His features were refined even as surprise marred his face. As that thought crossed my mind, I explained our situation.

“We were actually looking for a dog here in the city...We heard that they had been gathered in the courtyard here...”

Even I thought that explaining we came searching for stray dogs was much too wild, and that feeling only strengthened when taking in consideration who we were talking to. On top of that, though, he seemed to think we were the people he was waiting for, and I felt guilt at the sight of his shocked expression.

As I wondered how I might turn the conversation toward the topic of how the dogs were being treated and their general welfare, the noble, snapping back to reality, spoke up.

And this time, it was my turn to be bewildered.

“Oh, uh, are you also holding a wedding?”

“What?”

“I had intended to look it up ahead of time, but I had no idea our days would overlap...Wait, if you’re collecting them now, then you still have a few days, right?”

In my confusion, the noble before me stepped right into my personal space as though he were going to hug me.

“Please wait if you can. If possible, it might end today...no, in a few days, at the latest. But I really can’t have you taking away the dogs we collected right now!”

The young noble before me was on the verge of tears, and when I turned my gaze toward the courtyard at the sound of a woof, I spotted many dogs with sparkling-clean white and silver fur peering over at us.

Their carefully groomed coats were all glimmering in the light, and the red ribbons tied around their necks made them seem entirely appropriate for a celebration. When I saw that, I realized he had mentioned the word *wedding*.

The noble before me wore an expression that coaxed out pity from me and

said, “*Gasp!* O-oh, I see...If you’re here to collect the dogs, then you’re not...the standin priest and the chaperone...are you...?”

The standin priest. The bride’s chaperone.

I glanced at Myuri beside me, and it seemed that she had already fully grasped the situation.

Dogs with white and silver fur and a girl with silver hair. This district was where people who hailed from far-off lands lived, and there were many regional customs when it came to weddings. The tradition here must have been that white or silver hair was a sign of good luck.

Not only that, the city of Rausbourne was part of the Kingdom of Winfiel, and since the kingdom was currently at odds with the Church, all the ecclesiastical offices had been abandoned. No priest to conduct the vows ceremony in a wedding was like not seasoning grilled mutton with any salt. I could understand why they were trying their best to hire a similar standin.

We had appeared right in the middle of their frantic search, so we must have seemed like exactly the kind of people they were hoping for.

Unfortunately, however, we were not the highly anticipated priest and chaperone.

On top of that, attending to a wedding was a very important job for a priest, and it was not something that someone with no qualifications could simply try their hand at. It was clearly a violation of canon law, and things would be very troublesome if someone found out.

As I was about to say as much, Myuri took a light step forward.

“It’s a total coincidence that we came here, but if there’s something we can help with, we’ll help.”

Myuri’s eyes were glittering not at the prospect of helping others but for an entirely different reason.

Of course her curiosity had piqued at the sight and sound of preparations for a foreign wedding.

“R-really?!”

“Myuri!”

I tried to scold her for making the decision without so much as consulting with me, but she pushed me back by the chest.

“Yeah. My brother always looks awkward no matter what he wears, but he does look pretty good in Church clothes.”

She clapped me on the chest for added effect.

“Yes, yes, I would think so, too!”

“And the wedding chaperone? That’s the one who gets to wear the pretty clothes and a flower crown in her hair, and who walks with the bride, right?”

“Yes, yes it is!”

The young noble was leaning forward, and Myuri was in buoyant spirits—it was almost like they were going to clasp hands.

Both of them turned to look at me.

“Brother, God would definitely want us to help!”

Though she brought up God, faith of course was of secondary importance to her. When I looked into her glittering eyes, I could tell she just wanted to wear the fairylike white wedding outfit with a flower crown and seize the chance to join in a celebration.

I was about to bring up canon law and other logical reasons why we shouldn’t, but it was also reality that there was a troubled noble before me.

Not only that, but this was a wedding—a critical juncture. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event that was a turning point as much as it was a social occasion.

What would God want?

To observe and uphold ecclesiastical law, as established by the Church, or aid someone else’s quest for happiness...?

Though I was in distress, it seemed that the answer had practically been settled already.

“I...am not a priest, though...”

“I don’t care! That hardly matters! You just need to stand there and play the part!”

Under normal circumstances, wedding sacraments were the job of the clergy, and one could be charged as a criminal if they pretended to be a priest to swindle someone.

Strictly according to the rules, I should have refused.

However, if I just went through the priest’s motions at a wedding, I was certain that God would overlook it.

So long as I took no money, even if the event came to public light, I had a feeling I could insist that I was simply a part of the wedding party.

And above all, if I used logic as a shield here, I could not imagine how much Myuri would rebuke me.

“...Very well, we’ll help.”

“Oh! Thank you so much!”

Myuri beamed, standing beside the overjoyed noble who looked as though he had just been rescued. While I thought about how things had taken a rather strange turn, on second thought, it would not be so bad being involved in a celebration.

“Oh, right, right—you two don’t know who I am.” The young noble, so relieved that he looked about to cry, did actually wipe the corners of his eyes before standing up straight and continuing, “My name is Mercurio Cedano.”

“I—,” I began, then faltered. The name of Tote Col no longer was that of a humble errand boy who worked in a rural bathhouse. As we traveled and overcame the troubles that confronted us, I became known as the Twilight Cardinal and word of my deeds started spreading. Now people even associated special meaning with the name.

As Mercurio looked at me curiously, Myuri spoke up.

“We’re actually in the middle of traveling. My brother isn’t really my brother; he’s actually my chaperone who’s worked for my family for ages.”

It was not unusual for a noble to take a tour of several different countries,

and it was also common for noble families to have surrogate family members.

Mercurio seemed to understand the relationship right away.

“I was looking for a dog here because I wanted to take it back to the manor we’re staying at. It’s massive, and my brother’s busy every day...” Myuri acted like an adorably touching girl who wanted a companion to distract herself from the loneliness before she continued. “And to make things worse, I left the house despite my father’s objections, so if word gets to him that my brother and I played pretend at a wedding, then my hardheaded dad might faint. Is it okay, then, if we keep our names a secret, so that word of us doesn’t start spreading in weird ways?”

Nothing Myuri said was a lie, but I also sensed an indescribably deeper meaning behind it. Though she referred to me as her older brother, she still did not hesitate to say that she liked me as a member of the opposite sex.

What she said essentially amounted to *If my brother and I played pretend at a wedding, my dumb dad might pass out on the spot*, which had something more than a wolf’s play-biting worked into it.

“All right, I see. Oh, I understand. When I told my father I wanted to travel to learn poetry, he gave me a good scolding. That didn’t discourage me, though, so I made a promise that I would work under my old servant’s supervision and act with superb conduct, and he did eventually let me take a short journey.”

“Ah-ha-ha, we’re a lot alike.”

Mercurio and Myuri had found kindred spirits in each other.

“You never know who will catch wind of your name and where it’ll start spreading from. I will refrain from asking who you are.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Myuri and Mercurio then exchanged handshakes again, and then Mercurio extended his hand to me.

Now that we had come this far, I had no choice but to do my very best.

“Though it is not much, I will assist you in making this ceremony a most wonderful one, Sir Mercurio.”

“Oh, no, I am truly thankful for you. Now please come inside.”

When Myuri stepped onto the manor grounds on Mercurio’s invitation, the dogs all rushed toward her. Mercurio and his wide-eyed expression aside, Myuri went around patting all of them on the head. Preparations for the ceremony in the courtyard were at their height, with maids and servants busily running back and forth while the musical ensemble was tuning their instruments. The halcyon atmosphere, the liveliness, and the weather together started to excite me as well, but from one of the doors we passed by, I felt someone looking at me, like I was about to be smacked in the face.

With a start, I turned, and I thought I had gotten a glimpse of a burning red silhouette, but no one was there.

“Brother?”

Myuri, ahead with the dogs, had realized what I was doing and turned to look back at me.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

I followed after her, wondering what was beyond the door.

What was that?

If it was not merely my imagination playing tricks on me, then I could have sworn a terribly stern gaze had been focused on me.

“Oh, I’m sure the ceremony will be wonderful today!”

Mercurio’s emotional statement echoed throughout the courtyard as sunlight poured into it.

Myuri now had her hair plaited and was wearing a white outfit with an eye-catching crown of yellow and red flowers on her head. A white puppy that had particularly taken to her was sleeping at her feet.

Bathing in the spring sun, she petted the puppy with a smile, and she looked like a literal angel.

“Oh, Brother.” Myuri looked up, noticed me, and put on a bashful look. “Eh-heh-heh, what do you think? Does it look good?”

Back in Nyohhira, she would run around the wild mountains with a piece of cured meat in her mouth and always rounded up the village children to pull pranks that would make anyone faint.

Though those barbaric ways of hers had gradually receded as she matured, it was when I saw her like this that I really felt she was growing up to be a young lady. The jewels jingling by her shapely ears, now revealed since her hair was tied back, were like a magic spell that transformed a little girl into a young lady.

As the one who had taken care of her as her older brother, she was so beautiful that it almost brought me to tears.

“Yes, it looks very good on you. I almost want Mr. Lawrence to see, too.”

“Aw, what? Forget about Father. He says I look cute no matter what I wear.” As per usual, Myuri took an icy attitude toward Lawrence, who always adored his daughter. “What about you, though? How does it look to you?”

While I sympathized with Lawrence, I had no choice but to give my honest opinion.

“Of course, you look very pretty to me.”

Myuri was full of confidence, and she seemed to be both relieved and embarrassed to be told that as she brought her shoulders up and smiled.

“By the way, did you understand the ceremony proceedings?”

While Myuri was being dressed by all the women in Mercurio’s mansion, she should have received an account of this and that. The one exchanging wedding vows with the Cedano family was a girl from the Pristol family. Both houses were originally from the distant south, and the Cedano family notably acted as the mediator for all the immigrants who lived in this district. Along with being informed of the general history of each family’s lineage, I had also been told that they would be carrying out their vow prayers in a separate room, but that was the procedure of the Church, which was the same in many countries, so there was nothing particularly troubling for me.

It was the passage that went, *In sickness and in health...*, but I was confident with excerpts from the scripture.

“Yeah. There’s nothing really difficult for me. First, I go fetch the bride from her room; then we go to the church in the manor. Then I sit quietly and listen to your sermon.”

“After that?”

“As the angel, I prepare the cake that will ward off demons. I think it’s funny that it’s a cake that’s warding them off.”

This was unfamiliar to Myuri, and so she cackled.

That wicked demons hated sweet things was a popular folk belief. Though the Church tended to find fault with some traditions and customs, they, surprisingly, had tacitly approved this practice. I certainly had the impression that demons that happily devoured sweet cake were not demons at all, so perhaps even the hardheaded clergy thought it impossible as well.

And so that was why weddings were topped with cream made of sweet sugar and freshly squeezed milk.

“And those people we saw at the port were actually supposed to be here at this manor for the wedding, huh?”

She was talking about the men she had spotted as she ate her pirate bowl who were carrying large eating utensils. They had come from the bride’s hometown bringing furniture for the wedding and tools that would be used during the ceremony. Their ship caravan had scattered along the way due to bad weather, and the boat in which the priests were, of whom they had asked the unreasonable favor of coming along for the trip, was still very far away.

“They are going to cut slices with the big wooden knife and then take out large scoops with the spoon, but it is not for you to eat. Do you understand?”

“I do! I, the angel, cuts the cake for the blessing, and then I give it to the bride. Then the bride feeds it to that noble guy, right?”

It was a holdover from a bygone era when famine and starvation were common—a ritual to ensure they always had enough to eat.

The massive utensils we had spotted earlier in town were both for cooking food for the large number of wedding attendees and for that ritual.

“The order is correct, but they eat the cake after they leave the church and the banquet in the courtyard starts. There is something else before that—do you remember?”

The gluttonous wolf pup could only ever think of food once the topic went in that direction.

“What? Aw, what was it? Your blah-blah sermon blah-blah, then, um...oh!”

Myuri’s expression transformed from that of a graceful angel to a rambunctious girl.

What was waiting for her was a social event, something she loved second only to delicious food.

“The Cedano house that Sir Mercurio belongs to has a long and storied history. I had heard that there were rather strange customs in their weddings, and when I traveled to the south, I was surprised to see that some of those practices were still around.”

“A noble’s valor is honor. That means that you can’t be a nobleman if you can’t keep your bride safe, right?”

That was one of the highlights of the ceremony.

Once they had vowed to love each other, not only did the groom have to demonstrate that his feelings were real, but he also had to show all the attendees he was an honorable man who deserved to take a wife. It was common practice for the people from the bride’s hometown to all attack the groom at once after the marriage vows were exchanged, since their princess had been married off. The groom must then proceed to leave the church as he fends off their assault and protects his bride.

Only after that was their union considered permissible.

“But can someone like him pull it off...? I don’t think that guy’s ever held a sword in his life.”

“It is a ritual. A performance. I doubt they would use real swords.”

“Really?”

“In times long past when the winds of war ravaged the land, something like

that might have actually happened, however.”

That being said, when Mercurio had talked about this, he was clearly nervous.

The Cedano family had old roots in the kingdom. After crossing the sea long ago, they conducted trade on a large scale and prospered. However, the Pristol family was even older and had a tradition of valuing honor over money.

As I watched the servants roaming about the manor, I could tell there was a big difference between the groom’s family and the bride’s family—the rich Cedano family that administered trade within the kingdom and the old and frugal Pristol family that clung to tradition.

It would not surprise me if more than a few held a grudge against the Cedano house for buying their princess with gold and silver. I could not say I was not apprehensive that there might be some who would openly voice their displeasure if the ceremony turned out to be slipshod.

Yet, the manor was filled with the celebratory air of a wedding, and on second thought, I figured that Mercurio must have been nervous because this was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Then Myuri, flapping the hem on her loose dress, said, “Aw, but it’s so cool. Re-creating a battle to protect the bride at a wedding...” She loved adventure tales and romance stories, and she looked sideways at me. “I wished the person I loved would protect meee.”

She deliberately said this to herself loud enough for me to hear it, but the moment we had decided to help with the wedding, I had been ready for her to say something like that to me. She had said she liked me not as her brother but as a man, and she often tempestuously expressed how she felt very directly. Though I did not doubt the depth of her feelings, I was striving to be a member of the clergy, and most importantly, though we were not connected by blood, I could not see her as anything more than my little sister.

And so I tried to act as though I had not heard it again, but I felt like that was the wrong move.

I could not reciprocate her feelings, true, but treating them with disdain was something entirely different.

As if I were I gently removing her claws that she had dug into me, I moved to stand beside her and said, “I want to protect you, and you have been and always will be precious to me.”

Had her wolf ears popped out, no doubt they would have moved with great vigor, like they were flicking water everywhere.

It wasn't what she truly wanted to hear, but I made sure to give her a heartfelt response nonetheless.

However, Myuri slowly and deliberately inhaled, as though showing any delight would mean she had lost, then heaved an exaggerated sigh.

“Hmph. I basically only ever protect you, though.”

“Indeed you do. It is thanks to you that our travels have come this far. I am thankful for that.”

Myuri inherited the blood of the wisewolf, and without her wisdom, courage, and quick wit, this little lamb would have found a watery grave underneath the great crashing waves of the wider world a long time ago.

Though she still frowned, it seemed that she was somewhat pleased.

“Okay, then hug me.”

She smiled impishly as she stuck out both her arms.

“No. You are all dressed up right now. I will when we return to the manor.”

“Awww! Fine, but you have to! It's a promise!”

Her typical rambunctiousness peeked out.

That said, I could not say I was not relieved to see that she was her usual self.

Myuri, with her hair plaited and beautiful jewels dangling from her ears, looked like a fairy who might vanish if I looked away, which made me a little sad.

I suppose I could call this the feelings of a father about to send off his daughter to be wed—which might be considered a little rude to Lawrence, so I mentally amended it as the feelings of an older brother about to send his little sister off to be wed.

“By the way, I wonder what time the ceremony will start. Why don’t we ask?”

With incoming ships arriving late and their difficulty finding a standin priest and chaperone for the bride, it seemed as though they were on the verge of postponing the entire wedding, so there were some guests who had started making preparations to leave. Not only had relatives gathered from far away, but this was the busy spring season. Noble families, especially, sometimes had duties to fulfill for various events back in their homelands where they played a key part. Judging by the busy port, I could imagine how difficult it could be just to secure passage here, so postponing the ceremony was not something that could be done lightly.

On top of that, Mercurio was in such a flurried rush preparing for the ceremony because his family’s honor rested on hosting a smooth ceremony, which was almost as important as him taking a wife.

Those in high society lived with all sorts of obligations.

“I can’t wait to eat. I heard that in the south, they boil the dough after they knead it. I’m so excited!”

“Didn’t you just have that pirate bowl earlier...?” I asked in exasperation, and Myuri cackled mischievously.

“Oooh, I wonder what the bride’s like. The noble groom guy looked like you, so maybe she’s a cute girl with silver hair and wolf ears and tail, hmm?”

I shot her a grouchy look, and she gave me an innocent smile in turn.

That said, there could not be any delay in the ceremony, so just as I thought we should go and confirm the order of events one more time—

“My lady, where are you going?!”

“That is a guest’s—”

We heard an exchange coming from the other side of the door, and not a moment later, it was flung open.

“Hey, you’re the priest and the chaperone, right?”

“My lady!”

It was a girl with magnificent red hair, like a burning flame, who waved off the bewildered maids. She was tall with long limbs, and peeking out from the luxurious, strapless dress were powerful, rippling muscles. She looked like she had been plucked out of the adventure skits of a lady knight slaying a dragon that were popular back at the bathhouse in Nyohhira.

After chasing the maids away, she took a long stride into the room and closed the door behind her.

Her deep, burnt-earth colored gaze flicked back and forth between me and Myuri.

“I heard you’re outsiders who just happened to show up here. Am I right?”

She had what most would have called a piercing gaze. Though she was not much taller than I, her posture afforded her an entirely different presence. I shrank at the assertive air she exuded, one that let me know that I would doubtlessly have no chance against her if it came to violence. On the other hand, Myuri, sitting in her chair, was the same as always.

“Yeah, and?”

The girl then furrowed her brow and took a deep breath that almost made her a size bigger. Judging by Myuri’s demeanor, this girl had no intentions of harming us, but it was clear she was worked up about something.

Either she was thinking that outsiders should not be taking part in this wedding or she thought a fake priest was outright scandalous. Now that that thought crossed my mind, she did look somewhat like a female knight who donned armor to protect the weak prayer girls at nunneries.

However, Myuri said, “That dress...makes you the bride, right? Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready?”

It was only a brief moment that she was surprised, and the girl brushed away what Myuri said with a snort and brought her face right up to hers.

“Can I trust you?”

Though this girl could have easily weighed two or three times more than Myuri and was only a hairbreadth away her face, Myuri was not at all

frightened. She had excellent intuition, so she seemed to sense that the bride bore us no ill will.

But then in that case, it made no sense as to why the bride was acting as she was. The ceremony would be starting so soon, but here she was, suddenly barging into our room, demanding to know if she could trust us.

“Um,” I spoke up, and the bride’s gaze snapped to me.

I almost flinched, but I held my ground.

“We are indeed the last-minute replacements, but I believe this, too, is God’s will. We will do all we can to help you...”

But of course, since I was a false priest, I would have no choice but to leave if she requested it. I was a bit sad about that, but I was not a real priest, so there was not much I could do.

“And the house here has a legend of a silver wolf, right? I think I’d be perfect for that, then.”

The groom, Mercurio of the Cedano family, and the bride’s Pristol family both had a wolf design on their family crests. As the eras changed, eagles and lions became more popular, but old families that were once part of the ancient empire still sometimes retained the wolf motif in their heraldry. Because of that, both of these households had a tradition of collecting dogs easily mistaken for wolves with silver and white coats and hiring a silver-haired girl to act as the bride’s chaperone.

Myuri, of course—there was no other girl in the world with as beautiful silver hair as hers—had worded her assertion to make it sound like that was the reason, but she was a real wolf. In reality, there was no one more suited for this role than her.

However, the red-haired bride was still acting like an alert wolf and glared back and forth between me and Myuri.

I still did not understand what the bride’s true intentions were, but I recalled that she had asked if she could trust us. In that case, the thought that came to me was that this red-haired girl had come to ask a favor that was not so easily asked.

Weddings were huge turning points in people's lives and would normally be filled with smiles and blessings, but for the bride—the one who arguably held the principal role in a wedding—to wear such a brooding expression, several possibilities sprang to mind.

The first thing that occurred to me was that this wedding was not what she wanted.

Then again, I could not detect even the slightest hint of reservation coming from the girl in front of me, almost as though she would wrest whatever it is she wanted with her own hand; she did not seem the type to submissively go along with a wedding that her parents had decided on that was against her will. But there seemed to be a difference in affluence between the Cedano and Pristol families, and it was not unusual for a noble to marry their daughter off for political reasons.

It was more than possible that this red-haired bride was searching for someone she could trust, wanting to shut down this unwanted wedding. The problem was whether this was something an outsider could get a word in edgewise about.

It was my principle, however, not to abandon the troubled people who were before me.

Looking at the girl who seemed like a wounded animal, I announced, "My name is Tote Col."

"Wait, Brother?!"

I ignored Myuri, her eyes widened in surprise, and continued.

"I am the one known as the Twilight Cardinal throughout the world."

It was not that long ago when great turmoil had rocked this city. The redheaded girl seemed to have at least heard rumors and looked at me, startled.

"I hid my identity from Mercurio because I believed that there would be trouble if word got out that I acted as a priest. But if you are in distress and seek aid, then my name may be of some help. My acquaintances may lend a hand, too."

By using the connections we had cultivated thus far, we could at least help this girl, who seemed like she was being forced into an unwanted marriage, escape. All that was left was the question of whether she would trust us or not...It was then she answered my offer with spite.

“...If you’re going to lie, at least make it believable.”

Unsure of how to respond, I only shrugged, and the bride gave a slight groan.

“But you do look just like the rumors say. I guess you are who you say you are, huh?”

“The name of Twilight Cardinal is quite exaggerated, so it’s somewhat embarrassing, I must admit,” I said, and she snorted.

“Then...can I...trust you?”

The girl’s expression was not filled with anger but with agony.

“It’s actually unbelievable how stupidly straightforward my brother is,” Myuri interjected, and the girl looked to her. “‘Cause see, a cute girl like me keeps asking him to marry me over and over, but he says stuff like, *‘I’m gonna be a priest, so I see you as nothing more than a little sister,’* and refuses! And we’re not even related by blood! Even though I crawl under the blankets with him during the night all the time, he still won’t listen to me!”

Myuri spoke with a sullen look, and after a moment of surprise, the girl looked at me.

“...That’s ridiculous. She’s so cute—why not marry her?”

“Right?!”

Worn out by their exchange, I said, “More importantly, what is it you require?”

The girl straightened herself, as though snapping back to reality. It was not a graceful act that she had learned while training to be a wife but a brisk movement done by those who had gone through fierce drills.

“You people...no, I’m sorry, the both of you must have come here on God’s will. Please, I need your help. There’s no one else here I can depend on.”

The bride, the star of the wedding, was asking for help.

I exchanged glances with Myuri, and I found that her eyes were glittering—she loved stories like this.

“I need to make sure just one more time. You’re not working for my father, are you?”

A freewheeling daughter and a father who wished to rein her in.

That relationship was not unusual. Myuri, who was allowed to do as she pleased, was decidedly an outlier.

Weddings were supposed to be happy affairs, however, and not something to force upon someone.

“No. That is why I think we may be able to help you.”

The girl’s face twisted, as though she had been hit in the chest, and after a brief moment in which she looked like she was about to cry, she said, “I am so thankful. I truly appreciate it. Please help me do something about this mess of a wedding.”

So it was an unwanted wedding. Myuri, who adored nothing more than elopements in tales of romance, seemed entirely convinced that was the case as well.

Then the girl said, “My father is going to assassinate Mercurio. Please. Save my beloved Mercurio!”

“...What?”

The world was filled with the unexpected.

What the redheaded bride, Arte Pristol, revealed was a situation exactly the opposite of what I had imagined.

“My father is going to assassinate Mercurio,” Arte said again. “My hardheaded father opposes our marriage. My family is one that thrived on military exploits. But the Cedano family prospered immensely when their forefather was appointed as a civil official. My father always says that a man who has never been to war is a weak man, so he must see this wedding as a terrible match.”

I was taken aback, but the mismatch of family status was a real problem. Why else were marriages between nobles and commoners always taken up as the main topic of operas? And it was a problem that existed between noble families as well.

Arte shook her head and curled her bottom lip.

“I remember the time I first met Mercurio, at the festival in my hometown. Ever since they first met, my father never looked at him kindly.”

“Is that so?” Myuri asked, gently placing her hand on Arte’s knee in order to calm her down.

“Yeah. The moment Mercurio saw the sword I wore, he started telling me about the poem engraved on the scabbard. I was surprised—he didn’t ask about how keen its edge was or how many had fallen to its blade. It was the first time I’d met a man who came face-to-face with a sword and started talking about poetry; I hadn’t even noticed that there was an engraving of a poem. Mercurio told me all about the deeper meaning of the poem and the stories surrounding it. On top of that...” Her eyelids suddenly drooped, as though she was staring off into space, and her lips loosened. “He read a poem for me on the spot. Of course, the artists who frequent our family banquets and stuff had presented me with poems before. But all of them praise martial feats, and they’re all clearly flattery. A man’s obviously blind if he looks at all this and compares me to a flower spirit, huh?”

I was flustered, unsure how to react to Arte as she flexed her biceps, but Myuri genuinely cackled and asked gently, “Then? What kind of happy poem did he give you?”

As though she had been waiting for that exact question, she shyly yet proudly said, “It basically said, Why not place your sword down sometimes and have a nap at the spring’s edge? I honestly don’t know what makes a poem good or bad. But I was shocked. I had to memorize stiff and old poems when I was learning how to read and write, and all I hear during our banquets are poems of flattery trying to kiss up to me. I was amazed that such placid, gentle poems existed.”

As the very one who used stiff and old poems as reference material for

Myuri's reading and writing lessons, her gaze stung when she wordlessly stared at me.

"I became obsessed with him then. I begged him for poems like a child. But he never once made a sour face and instead read me so many poems that had me rolling on the floor with laughter."

Mercurio might have been talented when it came to poetry, but the reason they were received so well was likely because of his personality to begin with.

Myuri eagerly lapped up everything Arte had to say about Mercurio, perhaps even more delighted than the bride herself.

However, Arte's face suddenly clouded over.

"But from my father's point of view, Mercurio is just a weak man with a glib tongue. He would always interrupt our conversations and say spiteful things like, *'Why don't you stop talking and cross swords in a sparring match?'* My father eventually came to me and asked, *'Since when were you interested in poetry?'* That pigheaded man doesn't know how talented and kind Mercurio is!"

Someone who had lived through and made his living through war had a viewpoint that was entirely too different. From Arte's father's perspective, Mercurio was alien.

That being said, there was something that bothered me.

"But...did your father eventually approve the wedding, then?"

Surely things would not have progressed this far had he not.

"Nothing resembling a blessing, obviously. There are lots of people with good business sense in the Cedano family, so they're a major force that has spread its roots to countries all over. My father must have been apprehensive of what might happen if he outright rejected a request for marriage from the Cedano family. There are plenty of people who can wield a sword in my family but not many who can wield a pen. We have little money to speak of, and the power of the sword doesn't mean very much in this day and age."

In short, it was her father who had been the one forced to accept an undesirable marriage.

“There’s lots of tragedies with forced marriages, but this is the opposite, isn’t it?”

When Myuri asked, Arte drew up her eyebrows again.

“I swear, the men in my family have calcified in outdated thinking, like rocks! I knew my father would object, and I told Mercurio as much. Then...even though someone with his pedigree could have any other he wished, he took my hand and vowed that he would do whatever it took to put together a wedding...”

Arte’s cheeks went red, and she rubbed her hands together, perhaps recalling the moment.

Myuri, who thought of romance stories as the most precious and noble in this world, smiled warmly as she watched over Arte.

Arte then made a face as though she was suddenly waking from a dream, and her expression contorted.

“And I’m certain it wasn’t just my family that was against this. There must have been opposition from Mercurio’s own family, too.”

“Really? Why?”

“My family’s status isn’t very high, and we’re not good at making money. And on top of that...” Arte shrugged her sturdy shoulders. “Look at me...I look nothing like you’d expect a bride would look.”

I almost absentmindedly nodded, but Myuri preempted me and drove her heel into my foot, ending that without incident.

“That’s not true. You’re a really pretty bride, Miss Arte.”

“...Hearing that from a pretty girl like you makes me happy, even if it is just flattery. Thanks.”

“It’s not flattery!”

After that brief exchange, Arte continued.

“Either way, Mercurio was really successful in getting things done. But my father is stubborn, and all my relatives are scarcely better than barbarians. They won’t hesitate to let their physical strength speak for them when it comes to

something they don't agree with."

I ended up picturing a pirate or bandit leader, but perhaps it could be argued that old noble families were like that, too, in a way.

For warrior families, behaving like true and proper warriors was the very core of their existence, after all.

"But...assassination? Wouldn't that make things things even worse than just refusing the wedding if it came to that?"

Myuri was correct.

I looked at Arte curiously, who sighed.

"Despite how he always messes up his prayers at the morning services, my father's so cunning. You heard the order of events, right? There's the perfect opportunity for a murder in there."

"The order of events? Hmm, I go with you to the church...then, um...wait—don't tell me it's poison?"

What Myuri had thought of was likely the part where the bride, Arte, feeds the cake that wards off demons to Mercurio.

"Nope, he's not that clever. Not only that, but all the guests are being served the same food."

"Oh, right. Then..."

As I stood beside Myuri, her thoughts churning in her head, it struck me.

Of course there was a scenario where assassination would be most suited.

"Could it be during the ritual where the bride's relatives attack the groom?"

Myuri's mouth froze in an *O*.

Arte nodded slowly.

"He's going to claim it was an accident. In reality, guests do sometimes get drunk and get carried away, which invariably ends with someone becoming seriously injured. But that is exactly why they're going to let things get out of hand. The venue for this ceremony is cozy, in this private courtyard, but back at home, it isn't unusual to have everyone in town come, and weddings usually

spiral out of control with the townsfolk all jumbled in together. There's a story about a marriage between the children of two opposing territories that was supposed to help them make amends, but the alcohol reignited their blood feud and a great many died. Isn't that just the epitome of barbaric?"

With limited guests, one could quickly narrow down who an assassin was. That was why it certainly made sense to create a situation where it was clear who killed whom, but to treat it as an unavoidable accident.

"If it's true, then I want to beat up every single one of them, one at a time..."

"Wait, but," I interjected. "What convinced you he is truly planning an assassination?"

She must have happened upon him holding conspiratorial talks or something of the sort. There must have been proof if she was this certain of her suspicions.

Arte brushed her bright-red hair upward, and she turned to me with glazed eyes.

"Despite how busy everyone should be with spring festivals right now, all my strongest relatives have shown up. They're the kind who'd drink from the skull of a bear they defeated one-on-one. You know what I mean, right?"

Myuri seemed a bit excited by that, but I understood perfectly well what sort of people Arte's relatives were.

"Not only that, but they all carry around their swords. Each of them carry top-class weapons that come with reputations and war stories. Why do they need weapons at a wedding?"

"But don't nobles always bring swords with them to celebrations?"

Myuri was somewhat informed on these affairs, since nobles and royalty often visited Nyohhira.

"They do, yes, but...they are generally ceremonial swords. Most of them do not have blades that can cut."

"Exactly. More importantly, my father's been acting strange, too. Ever since I got close with Mercurio, he stopped trying to make conversation with me. The only explanation for everything I can think of is that he wants to stop the

wedding by force, or...he's just planning to assassinate Mercurio." Arte sighed, as though baring her grievances, then continued. "He probably wants me to marry a man he picked out. The kind of guy who only sees value in lifting big rocks. And he expects me to pop out hardy boys, believing that will revive our decrepit household."

It was an old perspective passed down from times of constant war.

Arte was a girl with the spirit of a new age born into a traditional family.

"If I was the only one to suffer, then I would be willing to go through anything for the sake of the Pristol family. But hurting Mercurio is too much."

Her red hair trembled, as though it had burst into flames.

Myuri looked at Arte like she was a shining star and gently took her hand.

"You really love him," she said and smiled, and Arte's face immediately went redder than her hair.

Though she had derided herself for not looking the part of a bride, she clearly needed to take another look at herself.

More importantly, a maiden in love should be happy.

"But what should we do?"

What Myuri said reminded me to focus. Indeed—how should we actually go about dealing with this?

"These skilled and hairy guys have their favorite weapons with them, right? No matter how much you've trained, Miss Arte, you'd still be outnumbered. And to protect someone else at the same time..."

"Yeah...you're right. I couldn't attend this ceremony with sword in hand. The best thing I could get my hands on is that massive wooden spoon for when I feed him the cake."

Myuri had even joked at the port about using it as a weapon.

This was not a comedy, however, and a wooden spoon would be no match for steel blades.

"And we can safely assume all the other guests are on my father's side.

Everyone is so aloof with me. Mercurio just keeps saying it's okay and doesn't listen to me...But I'm sure there must be people in Mercurio's family whose interests line up with my father's. Now that they're letting people with weapons into the wedding, we should suspect everyone."

And that was why she had been hesitant to trust anyone, but then when complete outsiders managed to get mixed up in the wedding, she saw her chance. She had come to this room knowing that this was the only place she could reliably ask for help.

Judging by how both Arte and Mercurio were acting, they just wanted to have their wedding without mishap or mayhem.

In that case, we had to do something so that the wedding would end peacefully.

The three of us would make our stand against a band of stalwart veterans.

"Or...," Arte said suddenly. "Maybe my only option is for me to back out of this, after all?"

If Arte gave up on the marriage, then it would be pointless for the people from both the Pristol and Cedano houses to cause chaos at the wedding as a pretext for attacking Mercurio.

"But you don't want to do that, and that's why you came here, right?" Myuri asked.

Arte gave a pained hum and nodded.

"...If you want to run away with Mr. Mercurio, then I may be able to help."

Since leaving Nyohhira and traveling, I have come to meet a lot of people.

Among those were people who were not human, and if they lent us a hand, we could sneak the couple out of the kingdom.

"The truth is, that is what I want to do. But Mercurio is next in line to lead the Cedano family. He has a lot of responsibilities, and in his absence, there would probably be a struggle for power and a succession crisis would break out. I can't just...ignore all that and ask him to run away with me..."

Arte was not simply a girl who wielded a sword. She was sharp and had

commendable foresight.

“I wondered if a priest could somehow persuade my superstitious father, but what do you think?”

She turned to me with an unsure look precisely because she already knew it was likely impossible.

For a moment, I thought, if only I were a dignified-looking elder priest with a beard...But if everyone could be swayed by a priest's coaxing, then war would have vanished from this world a long time ago.

“If the assassination has already been decided and set in motion, then he may simply pretend not to know anything about it.”

“...Yeah, that's true...” Arte sighed, and her gaze drifted downward.

“Is there some sort of secret passage in the church? I went there earlier to hear about the order of events, and I saw windows there. Why not escape outside through there? You just need to avoid a situation where Mr. Mercurio is mobbed and injured in the guise of an accident.”

“This is the manor of the rich Cedano family. Those windows are fitted with plated bars and glass. Even I can't break that.”

Churches commonly served as shelter during wartime, and they often housed treasures, so they were sturdily built. It seemed that tradition was observed even in the chapels of metropolitan manors.

“Then...”

The three of us desperately combed through our collective wisdom, yet we could not come up with a good idea.

Myuri finally looked to me as though she had struck on something, lightly shaking a plain-looking cloth pouch that she never took off, even when she was dressed up.

Her subtle gesture was asking if she should turn into a wolf and save them that way.

I donned a glum look because that seemed to be our only option. Myuri in her wolf form could even break through reinforced windows with her raw strength.

Arte's story, however, was still stuck in my mind.

Everyone present was a veteran who had vanquished a bear one-on-one. I doubted they would be frightened of a wolf, even a massive one, and that may put Myuri in danger. Drawing one's sword in a holy church was a damnable offense, though...and that is when it struck me. The incident was to take place in the holy church. That meant—

"I see."

"What is it, Brother?"

Both Myuri and Arte looked at me.

I turned to Arte.

"Miss Arte, if your opponents are unarmed, would you be able to protect Mr. Mercurio?"

Arte blinked, balled her hand into a fist, and fixed her eyes on me.

She clenched her fist, opened it, then finally squeezed it tight.

"If it's a fistfight, I have no intentions of losing, even against my uncles. Even if I don't win, I can use my large body as a shield that will keep Mercurio safe, so long as they don't have any swords."

I could picture her fighting bravely in the face of open violence.

"But can you do that? They're not going to comply with weapon confiscation."

"They are warriors, of course—they might be put on alert if we call it a confiscation. However, the ceremony will be taking place in a church. They are planning an assassination, so they may be unprepared, thinking this a one-sided fight. I can have them set aside their swords for a moment."

"That...may be true."

"How are you going to take away their swords?"

Right as I was about to respond to Myuri's question, there was a hurried knock at the door. It flew open without waiting for a response from us.

"Oh, Lady Arte! I finally found you! Why are you here?! The ceremony is

starting! Chaperone, are you ready as well?! Please get ready, too, Father! Come, come!”

The woman who entered looked to be the head maid of the Pristol family. Her hair was tousled and beads of sweat dotted her forehead because she had been running around, looking for the missing bride, and behind her stood several similarly heavy-breathing girls holding a white dress, the last piece of the bride’s outfit.

We were out of time.

“Okay, I’m coming,” Arte replied and looked at me. “If you can take their weapons away, I’ll manage. Good luck,” she whispered to me before leaving the room.

She was filled with tragic resolve as she walked away, like a noble princess from a vanquished nation being led to the guillotine. Myuri looked after her with worry as the maids dragged her away.

“You come now, too!” the head maid said to Myuri.

I had to head to the church as well.

“Brother.” Myuri did not say much to ask me her question. Her expression was a mix of unease and anger.

“The church is my territory. There will be plenty of opportunities for me to say, *Please lay down your weapons and stand*. I will use everything I have learned thus far to make it happen.”

“But...”

Even if they were to put down their weapons, they would likely keep them within arm’s reach.

Myuri was both anxious and fretting, so I placed my palm on her cheek.

“Don’t make that face. You’ll ruin all the pretty makeup you have on.”

Myuri’s expression tensed, and her face went red. It was likely equal parts bashfulness and aggravation.

“Now that I think about it, we have plenty of people on our side here, do we

not?”

“We do...?”

“They at times walk without making a sound and can roam the church freely, and more importantly, they are your loyal allies.”

Myuri’s mouth gaped when I said that, and she simply uttered, “Oh.”

At Myuri’s feet was the owner of a small pelt, who had started snoring at some point.

“Indeed. I will ask the guests to place down their weapons when the time comes. The more a family values old tradition and formalities, the more likely they will be to obey.”

“And that’s when I use the dogs to bring the swords to us, right?”

It was when we had been eating the pirate’s bowl that I noticed. When Myuri looked at something with want, the loyal stray dogs would immediately leap at the indicated loot. Moreover, how many times had I had my meals stolen by sticky-pawed strays while I was traveling? It was with that very boldness that they survived the tough life on the streets.

Not only that, but ever since Myuri had stepped through the door, all the stray dogs that had been gathered here had welcomed her warmly.

We just needed to rely on them to collect the weapons.

“Even if we can’t collect them, we can use them to cause confusion, and dogs running around people’s feet should be enough to keep the guests busy. We could use the opportunity to escape.”

Myuri, impressed, nodded, then grinned.

“I think your brains are finally working, Brother.”

“It is because I have your help.”

I pinched her cheek lightly, and she flashed a ticklish smile.

“Okay, I’m going to Miss Arte.”

“All right, then. Good luck.”

“I got this!”

Myuri stood, patted the sleeping puppy on the head to wake it, and left the room.

I was sure the wedding would end peacefully.

Since it seemed that my appearance, at least, was that of a first-rate man of the cloth, it should be easy for me to convince the guests put their weapons down. I told myself that to calm my unease.

“All right. Let’s go,” I murmured and sprang up. If people like Arte and Mercurio could not be bonded together, then how could I continue to speak of God’s righteousness?

I strode toward the door and reached out to it.

My hand made contact with air because someone had pulled the door outward to the hallway.

“Myuri?”

I looked up, wondering if she forgot something, and in that moment, I froze. Before me was a massive man, staring down at me. His beard was an eye-catching red, and I knew immediately that it was Arte’s father.

This man—whose values had been forged on the battlefield and who was plotting to assassinate Mercurio—had arms that were thicker than my legs. His neck was like that of an ox, and I reckoned this was what a frog felt like being stared down by a snake. No matter how strongly I believed in God, I knew the reality that his words rarely ever stopped violence.

“...C-can I help you?”

Though I managed to squeeze out some words, my voice squeaked, and the massive, red-bearded man standing in the hallway remained silent, staring at me.

It would be nonsensical for me to ask why he was here. For those who had lived through war, it was an inviolable rule to always investigate the target. He must have been watching Arte to make sure she would not get in the way of the assassination.

In that case, Myuri was in danger, too.

I adjusted my footing and recalled the layout of the manor. This was the second floor, and beneath the window outside was a simple bower for the music ensemble. If I whirled around at full speed, jumped out the window, and landed on the roof of the bower, I would be able to escape into the garden.

And since the building encircled the courtyard, no matter where I yelled from, it would certainly reach Myuri's ears. She would immediately understand that something had happened.

I finished working out my plan in my head, and I adjusted my breathing.

*One...two...*It was that moment as I was counting that it happened.

"I know you. What kind of secret business does the Twilight Cardinal have with my daughter?"

His massive hand closed around my shoulder.

And by the count of three, whirling around and running away was but a fancy.



Arte's father had suddenly appeared and immediately recognized my true identity. I could not speak for clever wolves like Myuri, but a leaden-footed sheep like me had no means of escape.

Not only that, but he had surely overheard all of Arte's speculation, so there was no need for me to say anything. From his perspective, as someone who had survived battlefield after battlefield where lives always hung in the balance, what we were trying to do was literal child's play.

However, Arte's father did not remove me from the wedding and instead thought my participation most convenient. I had no choice but to obey what he told me.

Arte's father rushed me along to the church, and I was overwhelmed by the heated atmosphere.

Along both sides of the aisle that stretched from the church entrance sat the relatives from each family. The Cedano family sat on the right, and the Pristol family sat on the left. That was obvious simply by looking at the guests—I

needed no explanation for that.

Though the same number of people were seated on the left, that side boasted many times more muscle mass.

Like the lord of an old family that he was, Arte's father led me to the altar in a dignified manner, as though he was the one meant to bring the priest here all along.

As I walked the short distance to the altar, I looked at the members of the Pristol family and saw that they were completely ready for battle, just as Arte had said. One even wore mail, and while that may have been formal dress for someone of a warrior's lineage, it was still unusual attire inside a chapel.

Arte's father then bid his greeting to the people who sat at the very front of the Cedano family side. One of them looked just like Mercurio but rounder.

Mercurio, who had one of the leading roles in this ceremony, was likely in an annexed prayer room right about now, desperately praying to God that the ceremony would go well. Arte, who would be grasping Myuri's hands, would be doing the same.

The reason I breathed out a heavy sigh before the scripture was because the ceremony participants' wishes were all over the place. Despite how the parties involved should be as one celebrating the wedding, it was almost tragic how everyone's thoughts were misaligned.

I wore a listless expression, and not because I was acting as a famous priest.

When Arte's father squeezed his massive frame into the pew, he stared hard at me.

It was as though he was reminding me, *You know what to do, right?*

I had no choice but to nod.

"...God created men and women in this world."

And with that, the wedding began.

I did not think my sermon was all that good, but the guests were listening intently. Or perhaps they were lending an ear to God's words while waiting to see what would happen next.

Beyond the splendid windows fitted with plated bars and glass, preparations for the banquet were still ongoing.

The peace felt hollow.

“And now we welcome the groom, who on this day, before God, will be taking a wife.”

I closed the scripture, the record of God’s word, and the guests all twisted to peer at the entrance of the chapel. Since this was a wedding between nobles, two guards dressed in light armor opened the door. The tips of the spears they held were made of silver fur.

Appearing beneath the crossed spears was Mercurio, a nervous look on his face. Perhaps the reason he strained to put on a happy smile was because of all the stern looks from the Pristol family.

His bow to God and the subsequent bows he gave to both families were stiff and awkward.

He raised his head and looked at me, then walked forward with his mouth pulled as taut as possible.

When he reached the altar, he placed a hand to his chest, bowed to the crest of the Church hanging on the wall, and stood diagonally in front of the altar. Arte would stand diagonally to the right.

“Now, honored guests, please rise.”

On the other side of the closed doors, Myuri and Arte would be waiting, listening to this exchange.

I closed my eyes, slowly inhaled, then exhaled.

I directed my gaze toward Arte’s father, but he deliberately looked away.

“May all those who have brought weapons today please place them down. The spotlight of the ceremony may go to somebody else if a sword gets caught on a chair and knocks it over.”

There was a ripple of laughter because the large members of the Pristol family did indeed seem to be short on breathing space. They removed their swords from their waists, as though understandably agreeing with me, and leaned

them against the seats in front of them.

Arte's father, who knew all the plans, obeyed with a sour look, placing his sword down.

"Choir."

I gave the signal to the group of boys waiting patiently off to the side, and they began to use their unbroken singing voices.

"Now, we welcome the bride, who on this day, before God, will be taking a husband."

Just after the door opened, there were gasps of astonishment.

That could have been because there was Myuri, who looked like nothing less than an angel, or because of Arte's beauty, with a pure-white dress that drew everyone's attention because of her stature, or perhaps it was the astonishing sea of fur, created by the white and silver dogs that sat dignified and proud around them.

Even I could tell that Myuri, who always wore a brave face that showed no fear no matter what she laid eyes on in this world, was nervous for once. I signaled to her with a glance, and she nodded faintly, then took Arte's hand and proceeded forward. The dogs at their feet moved in concert with them, and it seemed like they were walking above white clouds.

I could scarcely believe they had collected all these dogs, but it was certainly a show that caught the eye.

The expressions of the fierce-looking members of the Pristol family all stiffened at the sight of their house's princess. They narrowed their eyes, and even through their thick beards, I could see their clenched jaws. The most extreme of them all was Arte's father; his red hair practically stood on end.

In accordance with the order of events, Arte stopped before her father, took his hand, and gave her thanks to him for raising and taking care of her.

This was not merely a ritualistic formal greeting. There was an unusual and palpable tension in the interaction between father and daughter.

Behind her, I could tell that Myuri had signaled to the dogs with a glance. The

pups, who had been gathered together like a white carpet, quietly scattered among the seats.

Once Arte finished offering her thanks to her father, Myuri once again took her hand, and they came to stand before Mercurio. Arte did not look at me, but Myuri did and she nodded slightly, then gracefully stepped away from the couple.

“Groom, Mercurio Cedano,” I called his name, bringing Mercurio’s attention to me. “Bride, Arte Pristol.” Arte turned toward me as well. These were the blessed wedding rites, which had been performed hundreds and thousands of times.

I began to recite the “in sickness and in health” vows that even Myuri knew of even though she had no interest whatsoever in what was in the scripture.

Mercurio took a deep breath, as though swallowing his nerves, and declared, “I do,” and Arte, who was a full head taller than him, replied with downcast eyes, “I do.”

“We will now have the exchanging of the rings.”

Two people appeared from either side, holding a fine red cloth that was befitting a noble ceremony.

On each respectfully presented cloth were gold rings.

Mercurio took one in hand and slid it on Arte’s finger. Arte then did the same thing.

Mercurio gave her an awkward smile, and Arte smiled in turn.

I sensed a definite bond between them.

I did wish, slightly, that that would be it; that this would be enough.

God was watching.

But people could not see everything.

What was in another’s heart, for example.

“Our newly wedded couple have exchanged their vows,” I proclaimed loudly, and the guests raised a loud applause. It was almost ear-piercing.

Mercurio took Arte's hand, his mouth tensing as he turned to face the guests to give an elegant bow. Arte also bent, showered by applause.

With the couple in front of me, I read out the passage I received when I was told the order of events.

"Now, in conformity with tradition passed down through the ages in both families..."

It felt like the sound of the continuing applause changed ever so slightly.

One perhaps could say it was a strange moment, as though they adjusted themselves so they could stop clapping at any time. Arte, bowing before me, also seemed to have sensed the subtle change in atmosphere. Through the gaps in her dress, I could see her magnificent back muscles were tense.

"To test the strength of their bond, recognized by God..."

Just as I read that, two dogs trotted up to the altar. They were both white furred with round black eyes, and their rounded tails were wagging proudly.

That was when everyone noticed.

The dogs were carrying swords in their mouths.

"Hey, that's—"

The moment someone spoke up in a panic, the white carpet among the guests' seats all moved at once. The dogs moved too fast for the eye to see and headed for the exit with a carriage they had refined as strays with swords in their mouths.

The panicked guests tried to capture the dogs, but not only were the spaces between chairs far too small, but none of them could move all that well since they all had large frames. Chaos broke out in an instant, but those who did not know the true nature of the situation thought it was simply a sideshow and cheered.

The choirboys seemed to think that the wild ritual had begun, so instead of the solemn tune they had sung earlier, they sang a gallant melody encouraging troops in wartime, and the musical ensemble, who had been waiting for that very cue, joined in and aggressively banged out a beat on their drums. Several

of the ensemble members were whacked in the shins by the dogs carrying the swords out of the church, and they tumbled over, but that only helped heighten the atmosphere by inviting laughs and excitement.

The only calm people left in the chapel were Arte's father and a select few others.

"Brother." Myuri had appeared beside me at some point, her eyes glittering. She cheekily held someone else's sword, and Arte, still bowing, moved again. The way she slowly reached out to the sword in the dog's mouth was charged with all her built-up anger, and it symbolized her resolve.

Though Arte seemed like she was signaling that this was the very reason she had trained all these years, there was a hand that stopped her.

"Arte."

With a cool voice, Mercurio took both swords that each dog held in their mouths.

"There's no need for you to take one."

When Arte looked up, Mercurio stood.

"Hark! My name is Mercurio Cedano! I have taken the beautiful Arte as my wife!"

Mercurio held the sword in his right hand and announced himself with some terribly, terribly old war etiquette.

Though dumbstruck she was, Arte reached out to the second sword that Mercurio held in his left hand.

As though he had expected that, Mercurio tossed it away.

"Mercurio!"

He made a shocked look at the grievous cry, but he immediately put on a smile.

"It's okay, Arte. Trust me."

"No, Mercurio, you don't know anything!"

As she screamed, several men crept up behind her.

“Rgh, wh-what...? Let—let me go!”

Arte’s scream was drowned out by the people who had rushed her, and with her arms pinned behind her back, she, along with Mercurio, sword in hand, vanished into the crowd.

The reason Myuri was struggling to unclasp the catch on the sword she held was likely because she felt the need to help Arte, and quickly. I grasped her shoulder and pulled her to my side.

“B-brother, get a weapon to Miss Arte quickly!” she said as she reached for the pouch stuffed with wheat.

Now was the time to turn into a wolf and save the tragic bride.

It was just after she looked up to me, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Now let her go! From now into the future, your princess is forevermore my wife!” Mercurio shouted, his sword unsheathed, and the crushing crowd stepped back a bit to create some space. Between the gaps of people, I saw Arte, her arms being held down by three others like a real captured princess, and I could tell that the three hulking men necessary to keep the thrashing girl back looked uneasy about their odds.

When I saw that, I heaved a massive sigh.

“Very well, then I shall ask your sword if you are a suitable husband for my daughter.”

It was Arte’s father who responded to Mercurio—he took the sword that Mercurio had tossed aside, unsheathed it, and threw the scabbard away. There was a clear difference in stature between them, and even an amateur could tell from comparing their stances that there was also a difference in their skill.

Arte desperately thrashed and screamed, “Mercurio!”

Arte’s father raised the sword over his head.

It was more the light than the sound that caught my eyes and ears.

My body shrunk at the thunderous sound of clashing metal, and I felt a chill at the ferocity of the battle. As though she had forgotten to even blink and breathe, Myuri was desperately trying to throw off my hands to join Mercurio.

When I tried to keep her from doing so, she turned to me with such fury in her eyes that I had never seen before.

“Brother, why?!”

If you hold me back anymore, not even for you will—

“Myuri.”

I said her name, and the kind girl who would get genuinely angry for someone else’s sake glared at me with the chilling eyes of the wolf.

I, however, met her gaze calmly. It was not that I was scorning Myuri or abandoning Arte and Mercurio. It was because of what Arte’s father had said directly to me after Myuri and Arte left.

“It’s all right. Everyone is simply trying to be considerate of one another.”

“...What?”

I was not sure if the perplexed murmur belonged to Myuri or Arte.

That was because on the other side of the crowd, something unbelievable was happening.

Mercurio, the very picture of a delicate man, was stopping Arte’s father’s strikes in an impressive manner.

“Hrm!”

He warded off the next attack with a side sweep. Mercurio was deftly defending against the repeated horizontal strikes that came hard and fast. Sparks flew, and Mercurio’s slender frame was almost sent flying, but he determinedly held his ground.

Though he staggered, he still made sure to fix his footing and readjust his grip on the sword, and not a moment later, the Cedano camp stamped their feet and a loud cheer bubbled up from them.

“Yes, that’s it! Don’t let the Pristol wolves scare you!”

There came the cheer, and this time it was the bearded men’s turn to yell.

“The Cedanos’ white fur is lamb’s wool! Shear him! Shear him bare!”

In the center of the loud hollering, Mercurio blocked Arte's father's attacks one after the other. Arte, eyes wide in surprise and disbelief, and Myuri, who was similarly dumbstruck, looked to me.

Whenever Mercurio blocked, there came cheers that practically blew the roof off, and the choirboys sang louder as if doing their best to put up a good fight, and the ensemble played away on their drums and instruments.

"They sang praises of you as the Pistol Wolf—is that all you got?!"

Though Mercurio's shoulders heaved as he breathed, he shouted boldly. And before Arte's father could respond, Mercurio brandished his sword with one hand and gallantly...Well, he did lurch a bit, but he did manage to set it on his shoulder and extend his free hand.

It was obvious who he made the gesture to.

"Arte!"

Arte, who had three people holding her arms behind her back, crumpled to the floor.

Unable to stand, she had sunk to the floor and was looking up at Mercurio.

Mercurio, his gorgeous hair stuck to his sweaty forehead, pulled Arte up forcefully.

"I will be the one to protect you! Mercurio Cedano will protect his wife, Arte!"

Arte's father then took another swing at Mercurio, but he deflected it single-handedly.

Now that it had come to this, the situation was clear to everyone. That was because even though it was obvious that Mercurio's skinny arms were already tired and wholly concentrating on simply holding the sword, Arte's father let drop the sword that Mercurio had so weakly fended off.

"Arte, our way is open! Let's go!"

Mercurio tugged on Arte's hand as she stared blankly up at him, and he caught her as she staggered, practically cradling her in his arms. It was then that Arte seemed to finally understand her role.

And why her father and uncles had brought weapons, and why Mercurio was so confident that everything would be okay.

Arte turned to look at her father, and he raised his hands in defeat.

For a brief moment, she looked about to cry, but once she lowered her eyes, she spent the rest of the time looking at Mercurio. He was a good young man, who was one whole size smaller than her and had a slender face that made him look like the picture-perfect noble from a good household. Mercurio had said that he once asked his father to travel to learn poetry, and his father had gotten mad at him. He could probably count the number of times he had held a sword in his life.

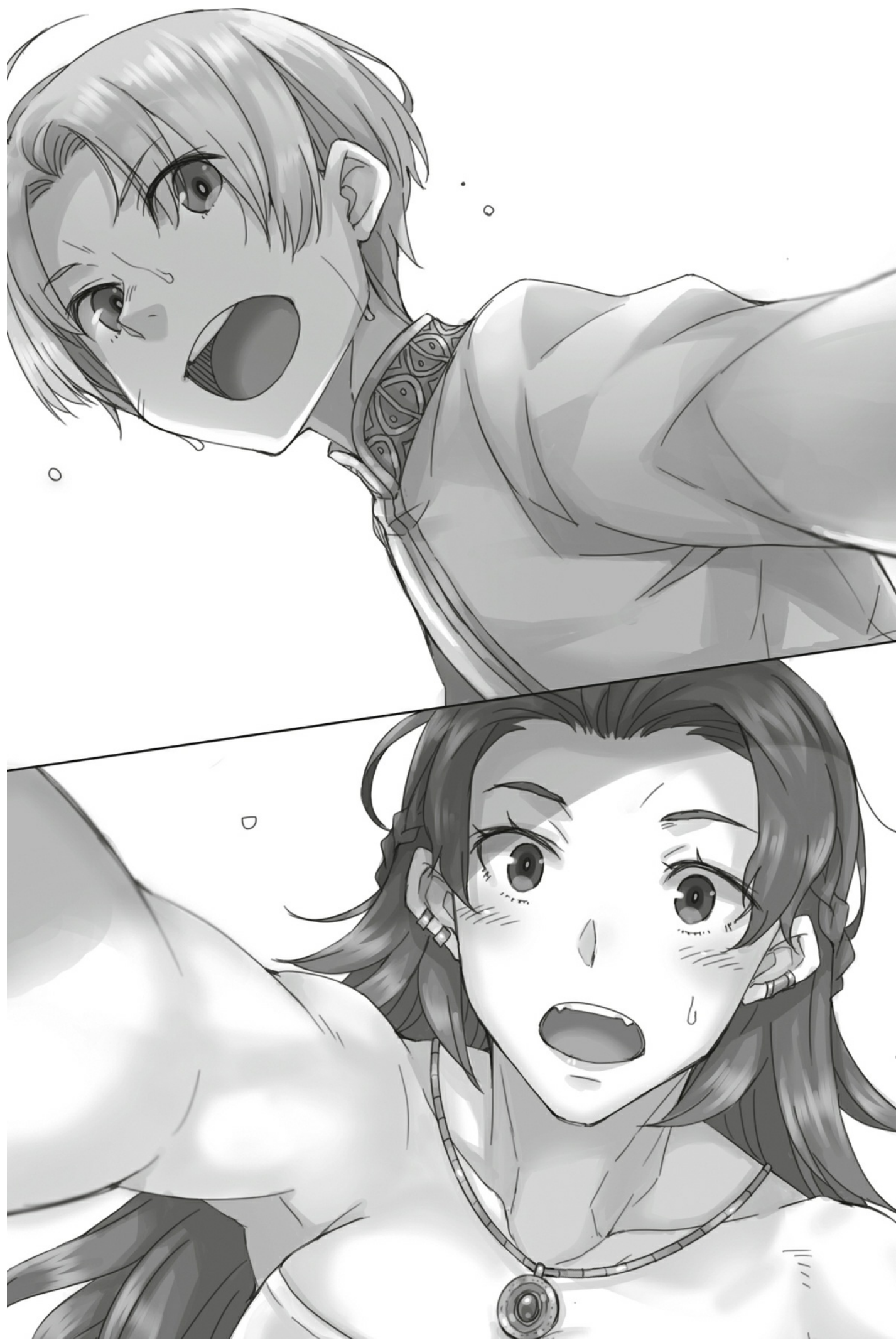
But Mercurio believed that since he was going to become a husband, he had to be stronger. Just as Arte had gestured to her massive, tempered body and derided herself as being the furthest thing from the ideal bride, Mercurio had believed the same about himself.

But then what about Arte's father?

"That should be good...right?"

Mercurio, taking Arte's hand, left the church, like the last scene of a knight's tale where he saves the princess. The bearded men watching them off murmured with uneasy looks. Among them was one with a bloodied nose, who had been kicked in the face by Arte when they had tried to hold her down.

"Our princess almost went on a rampage and ruined the whole ceremony..."



“I was even thinking about taking Sir Mercurio hostage and running!”

“I wore my mail on the off chance it would come to blows, but I’m glad that wasn’t necessary.”

That was what Arte’s father had told me when he appeared in the dressing room.

Arte had never shown the slightest interest in marriage, had no idea how to sew or cook, and had only ever held a sword.

Though as a father, he was happy his daughter always begged for sword-fighting lessons, he was often tormented by unease, wondering how long a girl her age could keep doing that. And so he decided to give something a shot—he apparently introduced her to Mercurio, who had just so happened to show up at an event in their hometown.

And since Arte quickly took to Mercurio, her father, the very one who had brought the two together, was shocked. *Seeing them talk for astonishingly long stretches of time, he would at times interject, discreetly suggesting Arte pick up her sword as she always liked to do.* And then that surprise turned into doubt.

Arte was a smart and kind girl. Though her father never showed how anxious he was about his daughter’s prospects for marriage, she must have seen through this. And since she had been suddenly brought together with Mercurio, no matter how slow she could have been, she would have taken notice of her father’s plans. And so he thought that perhaps Arte had grown close with the heir of the prosperous Cedano family in order to save her father’s face—no, for the sake of her own family, whose only claim to import was their old name and who were terrible at making any money.

If that was not the case, then why was Arte, who had never read a line of poetry in her life until then, so cheerfully talking about poetry with Mercurio? *Since when were you interested in poetry?*

That was what Arte’s father had thought after bringing Mercurio to Arte.

Without a chance to check on what his daughter truly thought, Mercurio took a liking to Arte, too, and the father had reportedly watched as things progressed and progressed, without a clue as to what to do.

No, was that true? Wait, but...

Arte's father had spent so many countless nights not so much pained that his daughter was getting married but thinking about Arte's personality—her inborn rambunctiousness, a girl who loved swordplay more than her three square meals a day.

In short, he was genuinely thinking about the possibility of everything going to waste at the very last second. She had often caused unbelievable commotion in the past, so he simply could not shake off his doubts.

On the contrary, he had believed that this marriage was something Arte was doing to spite him.

He thought that Arte was trying to express her disappointment because she thought he ultimately treated her just like every other girl.

He had suddenly appeared once Myuri and Arte left the room, but despite his large frame and frightening visage that would make any war veteran flinch, he had come to me on the verge of tears and vented all the worries he had been carrying inside of him.

I wanted to say how utterly exasperated I was at Arte's father's misunderstanding, who had failed to realize how his daughter truly felt, but I realized right away that things had turned out like this *because* he had cared so for his daughter.

He never said that swordplay was unfitting for a girl her age, since she loved the blade so. He had let his daughter do as she pleased, not forcing her to conform to what social norms dictated.

And it was because of that he had misread Arte's intentions; but what made it even more complicated was that Arte had done the very same thing.

From her point of view, all she ever talked about with her father was the sword and war, so how could she suddenly talk about love and romance with him? How could she say that she had been deeply touched by the poems Mercurio had spun for her? Would he not be disappointed that she had turned out to be such an effeminate girl?

That was where it all started.

And that was why Arte's father had come to me with a single request.

"I'm not sure what kind of ideas Arte put into your head, but please do not let this ceremony go to waste."

One could say he was practically leaving it all up to me.

That was because he had prepared something for Arte to fall in love with Mercurio all over again. She loved the sword so much, he was sure she would most certainly be taken with what he had planned. And he approached me to tell me that Mercurio, too, would go to any lengths to make Arte fall deeper in love him.

When he said that, I realized that Mercurio had been caught in the same trap, too.

I had no idea what would be set loose besides a massive, heavy sigh.

God might have known everything, but people did not. People could only judge others from a narrow, limited perspective.

That was true for how much more timid Arte's fierce-looking father was than I had first thought, and it was the same for Mercurio, who could not believe that Arte had no interest whatsoever in her husband's sword skill. And Arte, too, had convinced herself that Mercurio was looking for slim shoulders, a thin waist, and polite grace in a wife.

The father had not the scarcest idea that his rambunctious daughter had genuinely fallen in love, and the daughter assumed that her father thought only a fierce-looking man could be appropriate for the Pristol family.

One must recall why weddings were topped with cream and sugar.

Because demons hated sweet food.

"...What were we, then?"

Myuri, after returning the sword to its proper owner, sat cross-legged, sulking. Several dogs surrounded her, their tails wagging while hoping that the wolf girl might pet them on the head.

"A bit of spice, perhaps. Well, we were judged and summoned for our looks to begin with anyway."

Myuri sighed, patted each dog on the head in turn, then spoke.

“...But Miss Arte was so pretty.”

She looked up, spotting members of the Cedano and Pristol families patting one another on the shoulders as they left the chapel. They had ironed out a plan and made preparations so that this curious wedding ceremony would progress smoothly. They seemed genuinely relieved to see the new couple leave the church hand in hand.

I extended my hand to the sitting Myuri, and she stared hard at it before saying, “Brother, do you dream of stories about knights and princesses like that, too?”

I was not sure for what reason she had asked me that, but I answered honestly.

“I am not suited to be a knight.”

“ ...”

Myuri silently took my hand and stood.

“Then what role are you playing when you take my hand and walk like this?”

“You said it yourself. Your older brother.”

Myuri puffed her cheeks, stuck out her tongue, then squeezed my hand hard.

She then said with a glare, “Didn’t watching this whole fight make you think that you might be the only one who thinks that?”

People judged others by appearances, and it was difficult to overturn an impression once made; people oftentimes did not even know themselves.

That was generally correct; however, it was of course not everything.

“Even if I were mistaken, it is much more believable than you thinking yourself an adult.”

“Hey, what does that mean?!”

“Exactly what I said. I swear, you even had a sword ready for yourself; were you really planning on fighting with it?”

Mixing up adventure stories and reality was not something an adult would do.

“As long as you are a child, you will remain my little sister.”

“Brother, you dummy!” Myuri shouted, and all the dogs’ ears perked up in surprise.

“Yes, yes, I know. Let us concentrate on settling the matters before us for now, then. You still have to cut the cake and hand it to the bride in the courtyard.”

Myuri, who had clung to my arm and pushed her face up against me as though to bite me, groaned for a moment before finally lifting her head.

“Aaaagh! I wanna get married, too!”

She then grabbed my hand and ran off.

“Let’s go, Brother! The food’ll be gone!”

“Huh? H-hey, Myuri!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

That led us out into the courtyard, and now with needless worry lifted from our shoulders, everyone was ready to continue with the joyous celebration.

The drink started flowing, and things became rather lively.

Arte and Mercurio thanked us, and all their relatives thanked us as well.

I had done nothing, however. In the end, they had all simply acted out of consideration for the feelings of others.

And so a wedding that had taken place in one small corner of Rausbourne ended peacefully, and we secured the puppy with fur just like Myuri’s that we had been looking for and returned to the manor that Hyland was borrowing without incident.

We did run into Hyland, who had returned from her official business, and though her eyes widened at our exhausted state, we agreed to tell her about the details at a later date, then promptly withdrew to our room. Myuri, tired from dancing, collapsed on the bed with the puppy still hugged to her chest.

The sight exasperated me, but Myuri, after patting the clinging puppy on its

head and placing it under the bed, looked at me with eyes filled with both fatigue and lingering excitement.

“Brother, do you remember your promise?”

“My promise?”

Still lying on the bed, Myuri stuck out her arms.

“That you’d give me a hug when we got back to the manor.”

Her lovely plaited hair for the ceremony and face flushed from fervor made it seem like she had suddenly grown up. She was an evil wolf, here to confound the lambs that did their best to live on the path of faith.

Perhaps that was what she wanted me to think, but I had been dealing with Myuri for a little over a decade.

“Oh yes—actually, I did manage to sneak you a little gift.”

“...Hmm?”

“Didn’t you want one of those large utensils?”

“Wait, what?!”

I was talking about the massive prop used to bless the future life of the couple, so that they may not ever have trouble finding food.

Myuri shot up and crawled across the bed just like a dog that had been shown a piece of meat.

“B-brother, did you...get that for—?”

Myuri’s maiden face was bursting with anticipation, and I showed her what I got.

“You had some, did you not? I heard that those wheat noodles are a specialty in Arte’s hometown. This tool is used for boiling those noodles.”

What I produced was a long board with several protrusions sticking out of it.

Apparently, this was placed in the pot, used to stir the noodles, then pulled out.

“Oh...Whaaa...?”

All the life left Myuri's body at the sight of something completely different from what she had expected.

It was almost comical how quickly her ears and tail deflated; I sat down next to her and said, "See, when I saw this, it struck me. It is the perfect shape for caring for your fur."

Myuri lifted her head to stare at me.

It was like gold had come pouring out from a place she had least expected.

"Its size is perfectly suitable for caring for your fur, even when you return to your wolf form. I believe you should be taking good care of yourself in wolf form—your coat is so beautiful, after all—and not just your hair."

Myuri's mouth was drawn taut, and the puppy was clambering up her leg.

The moment it finally managed to crawl onto the bed, a waist sash, an overshirt, then trousers and whatnot all landed on its head one after the other, and by the time it managed to crawl its way out from under the clothes, it was looking up at a silver wolf.

"...Myuri, come on—how can I care for...? Myuri...!"

The large wolf pushed me down onto the bed, her nose pressing on me, rubbing her neck too vigorously on my face. Her tail whipped back and forth—where was her pride as a wolf?

I happened to turn my face to the side by chance, and there was the puppy, peering up at us curiously.

"Could you please tell her to stop?"

This wolf, no matter how big she got, would always beg for pets.

"Woof."

The puppy gave a tired bark, sat down, then scratched its neck with one of its short legs.

Silver hairs danced in the air.

This was one scene from a season where the long winter had ended, and the lively spring was just around the corner.



A letter came from the young ones who had left the bathhouse to travel. Though the snow had finally melted in Nyohhira, the mornings and evenings were still chilly, so I was warming myself up at the hearth beside the entrance when one of our regulars, a merchant, delivered it to us.

'Tis almost shedding season, I thought, my ears and tail hidden under my clothes as I accepted the letter. A rather strong scent wafted from it.

“Mm.”

I undid the cord that bound the rolled letter, peeled off the wax seal, and looked inside to see little Col's precise writing and Myuri's growing letters on the page. I read it, and I found my mouth drawn up crookedly.

“Heeey, Holo, want me to warm the wine?”

My companion, a tin tankard in hand, peeked his head out from the other room.

“Aye, yes, please.”

“Got it...Wait, is that a letter? Is it from Myuri?!”

It had been quite a while since the last message from little Col and our daughter, Myuri, so my companion's eyes widened like he was going to snatch at it.

As an act of kindness, I told him what it said.

“It says that little Col and that fool Myuri held a wedding.”

I omitted quite a lot, but it was not a lie.

My fool of a companion, his weakness being his daughter, would certainly be surprised...but then there came the shrill sound of metal and liquid spilling.

“Ahhh! How could you! The wine!”

My companion, who had dropped his tin tankard in his dumbstruck state, stood frozen in place with a vacant expression.

“Myuri...Myuri...!”

“You fool! Little Col simply pretended to be a priest at someone else's

wedding, and Myuri acted as the bride's chaperone!"

"Huh? I-is that all? Really?"

Despite how he occasionally showed quick wit and bravery that made even the wisewolf gaze at him in wonderment, he was generally less impressive than a doltish cow.

"What a waste...This is exactly why this fool..."

"Hey, show me the letter. Myuri didn't actually get married, did she?"

"Calm down! Here! Read as you please!"

I shoved the letter at him and went to retrieve the tin tankard that the fool had dropped.

The opening was not all that wide, luckily, so there was still some left on the inside.

I shall have the fool take care of the rest.

"Oh, Lord, you're right—that's what it says...I can't believe you...My heart almost stopped..."

Judging by his state, I wondered what would happen to him if Myuri truly did go off and get married. I was fed up with it, but since I, the wisewolf, was a kind wife, there were some things I did not say aloud to the idiot.

"Huh, it says they got a cooking tool from the southlands that's perfect for grooming, and they'll send it over once they can arrange for its delivery."

I was uncertain what sort of contraption it might be, but I could easily picture how little Col and Myuri were spending the shedding season in the outside world, where it sounded as though spring had come a step ahead of here. I could tell from the cord that bound the letter, and I could even smell the strong scent from the letter in my companion's hands.

It was an intimate scent, one that made it almost foolish to ask anything about any wedding.

As a human, my foolish companion had no way of noticing the scent, and I wished he would thank me for the kindness I showed by not telling him of the

approaching storm clouds.

“Hmm, what is it?”

“What is what?” I smiled in turn and came to stand by his side. “A grooming tool. ’Tis almost time for shedding season now. I will need you to maintain my coat.”

“Yeah, I know. I ordered plenty of brushes for you already.”

Though he said that with a sigh, it was aggravating how he was actually looking forward to it.

“You will be gentle, yes?”

My companion shrugged, then smiled and began to clean up the spilled wine. With no choice, I helped him. A fun playmate like this would be wasted on the young Myuri. The yet-inexperienced little Col was just right for that little fool.

“What is it?”

My companion noticed my gaze, a curious look on his face.

With a tickled smile, I said, “’Tis nothing.”

The long winter was about to end.

I told myself that the fuzzy feeling I held in my heart was surely because of the season.

On the other hand, however, I could not truthfully say I was not the least bit envious of the young duo’s journey.

Journey.

A journey, hmm?

“Hmm,” I murmured to myself, smiling wryly. “Though I doubt we will be journeying anymore.”

I ran my hand through my tail’s winter coat, and for just a brief moment, it swelled in a sort of anticipation.

But there was no end to the seeds of ups and downs in the world.

It would only be a short time from now I would learn that even the wisewolf’s

predictions can be unreliable.

AFTERWORD

This is Isuna Hasekura. It has been quite a while. We are now on the fifth volume of the Spring Log series. While I am surprised that it has continued for this long, it has already been an entire three and a half years since my tenth-anniversary event, and in terms of the *Spice and Wolf* main story, that is about as long as from the debut first novel to the end of the airing of the second anime season. In terms of the number of volumes, that is from the first volume to the thirteenth! I believe those who have been following this series from the very beginning would sort of understand what kind of shock I am in right now. We have grown old...And by the way, the time from my debut to the end of the second anime season, in my perspective, was a time filled with events that could have lasted me two-thirds of my life, so it seems strange that it was only three and a half years.

On the other hand, there have thankfully been all sorts of developments for *Spice and Wolf* itself, like the continual releasing of new goods or how Holo's 3D model was distributed in a Dengeki Bunko online event just recently.

At this point, I do sometimes feel ambitious for such a long-lived title, like I might publish a new volume when it comes time for the twentieth anniversary, but I will do what I can at my own pace, so I hope you will stick around.

While we're at it, a second edition of *Spice and Wolf VR*, where you can meet Holo and pet her ears and tail, has been confirmed, and we are diligently working on it even as I write this. The next story will be one that takes place in the Nyohhira bathhouse, so perhaps there will be some new characters! Please look forward to that!

There have been no developments particularly worth mentioning in my life, but if I were to pick one, it would be that I have been playing the mobile version of *Ragnarok Online*, and from the very first day I was playing with the same

guild members from so long ago, acting under the same guild name. And for the first month or so, it was just like old times, but all of a sudden, everyone was gone. And now I just play a little bit by myself—oh, I should stop talking about this. I'm sad.

Also, this year, in the first year of the Reiwa era, I once again got my hands on the newest Unity beginner's textbook and quickly gave up on it, so I can say that my usual routine (the ritual of wanting to acquire a new skill but never keeping up with it) is proceeding as it does every year. I also bought study references for English conversation last week! I got so much material I'm not quite sure how many books I actually have! Most recently, I downloaded a mental arithmetic app and have started doing some mental arithmetic. I have kept up with it for a surprisingly long time. I can calculate problems multiplying three-digit by one-digit numbers in five seconds on average. I tremble when I see the top scores, and I wonder if they use calculators...But now that I have written this much, my page has filled up.

I believe the next volume should be *Wolf and Parchment*, and I hope you will pick that one up as well!

Isuna Hasekura

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