

SPICE
&
WOLF

VOL. 3

ISUNA HASEKURA



Scanned and Proofed by DragonAshe (a.k.a. Merithyn)


Version 1.0

SPICE & WOOLF

VOL. 3

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
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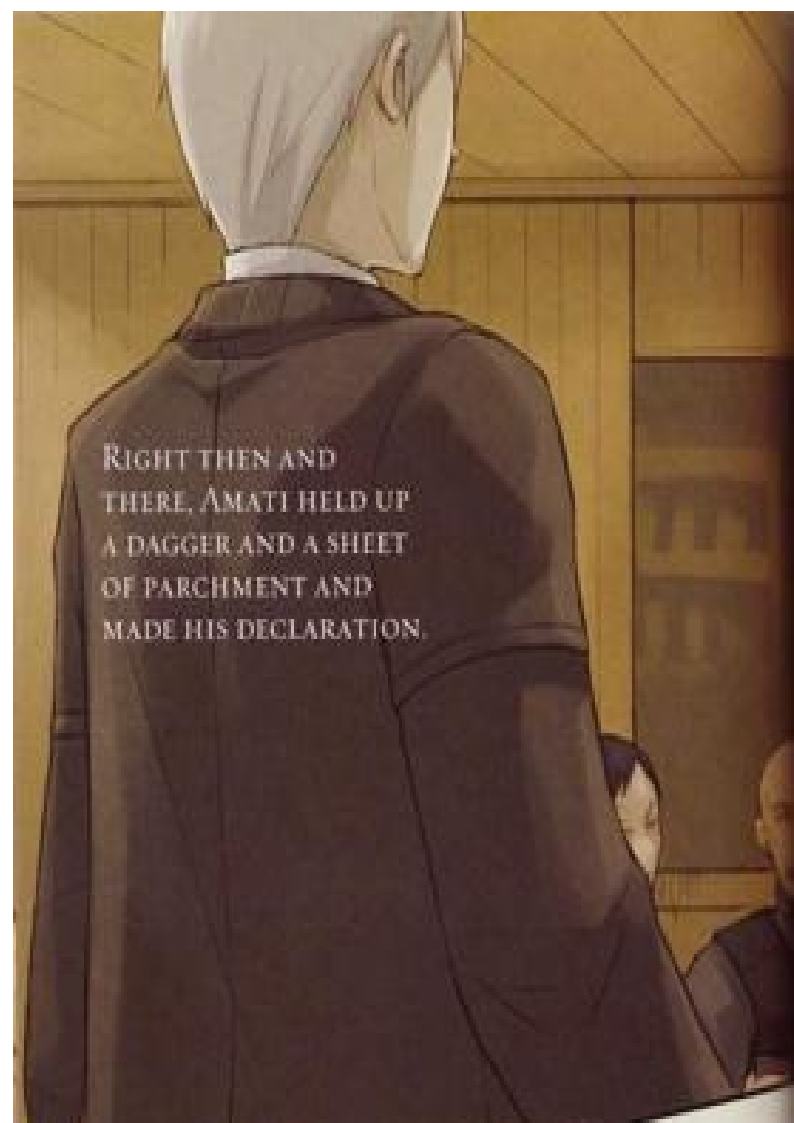
WITCH.
THE WORD APPEARED
IN HIS MIND JUST
AS THE WOMAN
LOOKED AT HIM.

"YOU'RE QUITE A HANDSOME MAN,
BUT YOU THINK ME A WITCH—
I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR EYES."

"IN THAT CASE, PERHAPS
THAT'S HOW I SHOULD
INTRODUCE YOU?"

—DIANA RIVERA,
THE CHRONICLER

GEORGE
THE MERCHANT



"I WILL PAY THE DEBT THAT NOW WEIGHS UPON THE SLENDER SHOULDERS OF THIS TRAVELING NUN—AND WHEN THIS GODDESS OF LOVELINESS DOES REGAIN HER FREEDOM, I SWEAR BY SAINT LAMBARDOS, WHO WATCHES OVER THIS ROWEN TRADE GUILD, THAT HOLO THE NUN WILL HAVE MY UNDYING LOVE!"

RIGHT THEN AND THERE, AMATI HELD UP A DAGGER AND A SHEET OF PARCHMENT AND MADE HIS DECLARATION.



—AMATI
THE FISHMONGER



"YOU HAVE
ME, DON'T
YOU?"
HE SAID,
COMPLETELY
SERIOUS.

THEY WERE
NOT WORDS
THAT COULD
BE SAID
LIGHTLY.

BUT HOLO
MERELY
SCOFFED
AND SHOT
BACK, "WHAT
ARE YOU TO
ME? NAY—
WHAT AM
I TO YOU?"

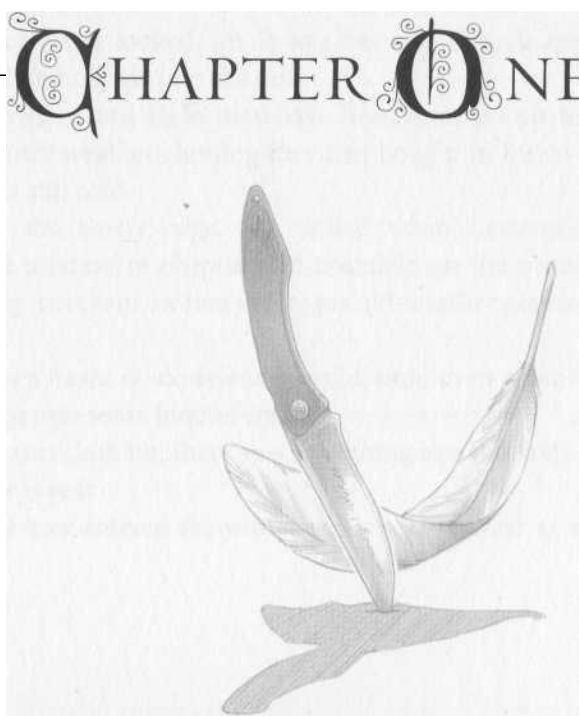


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CHAPTER ONE



Lawrence and Holo were six days out of Ruvinheigen. With each passing day, the cold grew more severe, and the sky remained frustratingly cloudy, so that even at the height of noonday, the meager wind was enough to bring a chill.

Once they drew alongside the river, the cold from the mist combined with the frigid air to make it that much more bitter.

Even the river water looked icy. It was hazy, as though the cloudy sky itself had melted into the flow.

However Lawrence and Holo may have been bundled up in secondhand winter-weather clothing they had bought in Ruvin-heigen, cold was still cold.

Nevertheless, the frosty edge was dulled when Lawrence reflected with a mixture of chagrin and nostalgia on the times when, as a young merchant, he had to forego cold-weather gear in favor of cargo.

Evidently, seven years of experience would whip even a rank amateur like him into some kind of shape.

Besides the warm clothing, there was something else that mitigated the cold this year.

Lawrence had now entered the winter of his seventh year as a merchant since becoming independent at age eighteen, and he looked sideways at the person sitting next to him in the driver's seat.

Typically, he sat in that seat alone.

Even on those rare occasions when he did happen to be traveling with another, he would not sit in the driver's seat with Lawrence — and they certainly wouldn't have shared the same tarp over their knees for warmth.

“Is aught the matter?” asked his companion, her slightly archaic speech evident as ever.

She was a lovely girl who appeared to be in her teens, with a stunning fall of chestnut hair that would have been the envy of any noblewoman.

But what Lawrence envied was neither her flowing locks nor the expensive robe wrapped about her body.

No, what he envied was the thickly furred tail that lay across her lap as she carefully groomed it.

It was the same chestnut brown as her hair, save for its snow-white tip, and the tail was every inch as warm as it appeared to be. Were it made into a stole it would be every nobleman’s wife’s object of desire, but unfortunately, it was not for sale.

“Will you hurry your grooming and put your tail under the tarp again?”

Sitting there wrapped in a robe, neatly combing her tail fur, Holo looked for all the world like a nun doing some kind of handicraft.

She shot Lawrence an unpleasant glance with her red-tinged brown eyes before her lips parted, showing a flash of white fangs.

“My tail is not your personal muffler.”

The tail in question flicked slightly.

That same tail, which a passing traveler or merchant would surely mistake for a simple fur of some kind, was indeed attached to its original owner, who so fastidiously groomed it. And she didn’t just have a tail; underneath her hood was also a pair of pointed wolf ears.

Naturally, these ears and tail indicated that she was no mere human.

Though there were people who, possessed by fairies or demons, had this or that inhuman feature when they were born, this girl was not such a person.

Her true form was that of a colossal wolf who dwelled within wheat; she was Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. An adherent of the common Church faith would fear such an entity as a pagan god, but Lawrence was past such fear.

He was much more likely to reappropriate the tail Holo was so proud of as a lap warmer.

“It’s such fine fur, though; putting it under the tarp keeps my legs as warm as a mountain of pelts would.”

Just as Lawrence hoped, Holo sniffed proudly and tucked her tail back underneath the tarp across the legs.

“Anyway, will we make the town soon? We will arrive before the day is out, no?”

“Just a bit farther along this river,” said Lawrence.

“And then, finally, a hot meal. I’ve had my fill of cold gruel. I can’t stand another bite!”

Lawrence could brag of more experience eating bad cooking than Holo could, but he was in complete agreement with her.

Eating well was one of the few pleasures of travel, but even that pleasure disappeared with the arrival of winter.

In the freezing cold, the only choices were crusty rye bread or porridge made from the same, with tasteless jerky or those few vegetables that could be stored for long periods of time — garlic and onions.

With her keen sense of smell, Holo couldn’t eat the aforementioned garlic or onions, and though she hated the bitter taste of rye bread, she managed to choke it down with water.

For Holo the glutton, this was not far from torture.

“Well, the town we’re bound for is in the middle of a huge fair, so you can look forward to all kinds of food.”

“Oh ho. But will your coin purse handle such extravagance?”

A week earlier in the city of Ruvineigen, Lawrence’s greed led him to fall into a desperate trading company’s trap, and he had been on the verge of accepting complete ruin.

However, after a series of twists, he avoided that but still had not turned a profit, and indeed had come away with some loss.

As for the armor that was the cause of it all, he had wound up unloading it in Ruvineigen for rock-bottom prices rather than transporting the heavy goods farther north, where prices were likely to be even worse.

Despite Holo’s frequent requests to buy her this or that bauble, her last remark showed some consideration for Lawrence’s rather dire straits.

She was frequently abrasive and high-handed, but her heart was fundamentally a good one.

“Don’t worry, your food bill’s within the budget.”

Holo still seemed to be worried about something. “Mm...” “Besides, I wound up not being able to give you those honeyed peach preserves I promised you. Just think of it as payment for that.” “’Tis true and yet...”

“What?”

“I’m half-worried about your balance but half-worried about myself. If I eat too extravagantly, we’ll have to stay in that much poorer lodgings.”

Lawrence smiled in understanding. “Well, I was planning on staying in a decent inn. Surely you’re not going to tell me it must have separate bedrooms with a fireplace in each?”

“I would not go so far as that, but it won’t do to have you use my appetite as an excuse.”

“An excuse for what?”

Lawrence looked ahead to correct the horse’s path, at which point Holo leaned over and whispered in his ear, “For only renting a single bed, saying you lack the coin to do more. Sometimes I prefer to sleep alone.”

Lawrence yanked on the reins, and the horse neighed its uncertainty.

Having become quite used to this sort of teasing from Holo, he was quick to recover.

He forced calm to his face and gave her a cold look. “I’m not sure someone who snores so readily should be talking.”

Perhaps taken aback by the rapidity of Lawrence’s recovery, Holo drew away from him, twisting his lip unpleasantly.

Lawrence pressed the attack, so as not to let this rare opportunity for victory escape.

“Besides, you’re hardly my type.”

Holo’s keen ears could easily tell truth from lies.

What Lawrence had just said was—just barely—not a lie.

Holo’s face froze, perhaps from surprise at the truth of Lawrence’s words.

“Surely you know I’m telling the truth,” said Lawrence, closing in on the final blow.

Holo stared at him, dumbfounded for a moment, her mouth opening and closing wordlessly. Eventually she realized that her response itself was letting Lawrence get the better of her.

Her ears drooped underneath her hood, and she looked down, dejected.

It was Lawrence’s first victory in quite some time.

Nonetheless, it was not a true victory.

While it was not precisely a lie to say that Holo wasn’t Lawrence’s type, neither was it precisely the truth.

All he needed to do was tell her as much, and his revenge for all the times he had suffered as her plaything would be complete.

He reflected on how fond he was of Holo’s laughing face or how innocent she looked as she slept.

And, indeed, her dejected mien was quite dear to him, as well.

Or, put another way—

“So you like to see me this way, do you?”

Lawrence met Holo’s upturned gaze and was unable to stop himself from blushing.

“Such foolishness. The more idiot the male, the weaker a girl he fancies, never realizing his head the weakest part of all,” mocked Holo, flashing her white fangs as she turned the tables on Lawrence.

“If I’m to be the helpless princess, you’ll need to play the intrepid knight. And yet what are you really?”

She pointed her finger at him and pressed him for an answer.

Countless scenes flashed through Lawrence’s mind —scenes that served as a painful reminder that he was no chosen knight, but an ordinary traveling merchant.

Holo gave a short sigh, evidently satisfied by his reaction, but then she put her index finger to her chin as something seemed to occur to her.

“Though come to that, I suppose you are a knight of sorts. Hm.”

Lawrence sifted through his memories but could not think of any time when he had been particularly gallant.

“What, have you forgotten? Did you not stand between me and my attackers? ’Twas in the tunnel beneath Pazzino, during that silver coin nonsense.”

“...Oh, that.”

Lawrence remembered the incident but still didn’t feel particularly knightly. He had been shaking so badly he could barely stand, his clothes in tatters.

“It’s not physical strength that makes a knight. ’Twas the first time I’ve been protected by anyone.”

Holo smiled sheepishly and drew near to Lawrence. The rapidity of her mood swings was always alarming — fast enough to make a merchant, even one used to the vicissitudes of profit and loss, run away screaming.

Lawrence, however, had nowhere to run.

“And you’ll look after me henceforth, yes?” The “wolf” smiled a soft, innocent smile that was distinctly kittenish. No hardworking merchant, used to years of toil and travel, had any right to smile such a smile.

But the smile was fake. Holo was still angry at Lawrence’s claim that she was not his type — extremely angry, in all likelihood.

Lawrence was well aware of this.

... Sorry.

Like magic, Holo's smile became genuine when she heard that word. She sat up and giggled indulgently "That's what I like about you."

In their back-and-forth teasing, Holo and Lawrence were like two frolicking pups.

In the end, they were very comfortable with each other.

"Anyhow, I suppose I don't mind a single bed, but I'll take twice as much dinner to compensate."

"I know, I know," answered Lawrence, wiping the unpleasant sweat from his brow—it wasn't even cold.

Holo raised her voice in a laugh once more. "So, what's tasty in this part of the world?"

"The local specialty, you mean? Well, I don't know if it counts as a specialty, really, but..." "Fish, is not?"

Lawrence was about to say just that, so Holo's quick answer surprised him.

"Indeed, it is. Yes, west of here there's a lake. Dishes made with fish taken from that lake are what passes for the local specialty. But how did you know?"

Holo could generally discern people's motives, but Lawrence didn't think she could simply read his mind like that.

"Oh, I've just been catching the scent on the wind," she said, pointing to the opposite shore of the river along which they traveled. "That caravan, it's carrying fish."

Lawrence looked and noticed for the first time a caravan of wagons that was so far away it was all he could manage to count them — he certainly couldn't tell what they carried. The caravan would probably meet up with Lawrence and Holo eventually, based on the direction and speed with which the horses were pulling the wagons.

"Though I can't fathom what a fish dish would be. Would it be anything like the eel we had in Ruvinheigen?"

"That was just fried in oil. There are more involved dishes — steamed with meat or vegetables cooked with spices. Also, this town's got another specialty."

"Oh ho!" Holo's eyes glinted, and beneath the tarp, her tail wagged to and fro in anticipation.

"You can look forward to it once we get there."

Holo puffed her cheeks out a bit in frustration at Lawrence's teasing, but she was far from angry.

“What say you to buying some fish from yonder caravan if they prove to be of good quality?” she asked.

“I don’t have an eye for fish. I took a loss on dealing fish once, so I try to avoid them.”

“But you’ve my eyes and nose now.” “Can you sniff out the quality of fish?”

“I’ve half a mind to sniff out your quality!” said Holo with a mischievous smile. Lawrence had surrendered.

“Mercy, please! I suppose if they have anything worth buying, we can pick some up and have prepared for us in town. It’s a better deal that way, too.”

“Quite! You may rely on me.”

Though it wasn’t exactly clear where Holo and Lawrence would meet up with the caravan that ostensibly carried fish, the distance between the two was steadily closing. Lawrence guided the horse down the road.

And yet —thought Lawrence to himself, looking first to the caravan, then aside at his traveling companion.

If her eyes and nose were good enough to tell the quality of a fish, perhaps she really could take the measure of a person the same way.

Lawrence laughed the notion off, but it still nagged at him.

He casually brought his right shoulder up to his nose and took a whiff. Despite living on the road, he didn’t think he smelled too bad — and Holo herself had but a single change of clothes.

He was mulling this excuse over when he felt a gaze upon him.

“Goodness. You really are so charming, I’ve no idea what to do with myself,” said Holo, exasperated.

Lawrence had no response.

The river flowed so slowly that at a glance, it seemed not to be moving at all. Soon, people who had stopped to let their horses drink or shift their loads came into view. There was also a rare traveling sword sharpener — a sword stuck in the ground served in place of a sign. The sword sharpener yawned, chin in hands, leaning on his large whetstone.

There was also a raff moored at a pier, where a knight stood with his horse, arguing with the boatman. The knight was only lightly equipped, so he was probably a messenger from this or that fort. Most likely, the boatman did not want to embark on a trip without more passengers, which was the source of the argument.

Lawrence himself had been angry at boatmen unwilling to set out when he was in a hurry, so the scene brought a pained smile to his face.

As the land shifted from endless wild plains to cultivated farmland, peasants doing their work popping up more and more frequently.

No matter how many times he saw it, a change of scenery that came along with human activity always made Lawrence happy.

It was about then that that Holo and Lawrence finally met up with the caravan.

There were three wagons in all, each drawn by a pair of horses. The wagons lacked drivers' seats, and one well-dressed man sat in the bed of the last cart while a hired laborer guided each cart as he walked.

Lawrence was impressed by the extravagance of using two horses per wagon, but as they got closer to the caravan, he realized it was not just for show.

Piled on the wagon beds were barrels and crates big enough to hold a person. Some had been filled with water — apparently for the captured fish to swim in.

Unsalted fish of any kind was a luxury. Live fish was all the more so.

Although the transport of live fish was rare in and of itself, there was something else about the caravan that surprised Lawrence even more.

The person who evidently transported these three large wagons of fresh fish was a merchant even younger than Lawrence.

“Fish, you say?” said the young man in the last cart, responding to Lawrence's question. He wore the traditional oiled leather coat of a fishmonger.

“Yes, I was wondering if you might sell me a few,” said Lawrence, who had traded places with Holo.

The young merchant's reply was quick. “I'm terribly sorry, all of our fish have been spoken for already.”

It was an unexpected answer; the young man seemed to realize the surprise he had caused Lawrence, and he pulled back his hood to show his face properly.

The young man's face was as boyish as his youthful voice. Though he could not strictly be called “boy,” he was certainly not yet twenty. Fishmongers were a generally rough and manly lot, but the young man was unusually slender. His wavy blond hair only added to his aura of refinement.

Even if the man was as young as he looked, the fact that he transported three wagonloads of fresh fish meant he was not a merchant to be underestimated.

“You'll pardon me for asking, but are you a traveling merchant?” asked the lad.

Lawrence couldn't tell whether the young man's smile was genuine or mercantile, but in any case, the only reasonable response was to smile back. “Yes, I've just come from Ruvineigen.”

“I see. Well, there’s a lake about a half day’s journey up the road we’ve just come down. I’m sure you can deal with the fishermen there. They’re bringing in excellent carp of late.”

“Ah, no, I’m not buying for business. I was merely hoping you could sell me a few fish for dinner. That is all.”

The young merchant’s smile quickly disappeared in favor of surprise — this was probably the first time he had heard such a request.

A merchant hauling salted fish over long distances would be quite used to selling a little on the road, but such a practice was quite out of the ordinary when transporting fresh fish from a nearby lake.

The young merchant’s expression of surprise soon shifted to one of careful consideration.

Having met with an unexpected situation, he was probably trying to decide whether there was a new business to be had here.

“You’re quite serious about your trade,” said Lawrence.

“Oh —said the lad, returning to himself and obviously flustered. “My apologies! Er, incidentally, you’re looking for fish for dinner, you must be stopping in Kumersun, yes?”

“Indeed. For the winter market and also to take in the festival.”

Kumersun was the name of the city they were bound for, just in time for the town’s great market, which was held twice a year in the summer and the winter.

There was also a festival that coincided with the winter market.

Lawrence didn’t know the specifics, but he had heard it was a pagan celebration that would make any devout follower of the Church faint dead away.

Six days’ travel north from Ruvineigen, a city which even now functioned as a resupply depot for the Church-funded incursions against pagans, relations between Church followers and pagans were not as simple as they were in the south.

The nation that controlled the vast lands north of Ruvineigen was known as Ploania, and there were many pagans among the royalty and nobility there. It was only natural that there would be cities where the Church and pagans coexisted.

Kumersun, belonging as it did to the nobility of Ploania, distanced itself from troublesome religious issues. It was a large town devoted to economic prosperity, and the Church was forbidden from proselytizing there. Inquiring as to whether the town’s festival was of the Church faith or the pagan faith was likewise prohibited — the explanation being that it was simply a tradition of the town.

Given that such festivals were a rarity and that pagans could safely attend them, people would pack themselves into the town every year to attend the event, which was known as the Laddora festival.

Based on what Lawrence had heard, he planned to arrive a bit early in order to beat the crowds, but

seemed he'd been naive.

"Might I ask if you've already arranged for accommodations?" asked the young merchant with worry on his face.

"The festival is the day after tomorrow. Surely the inns aren't all occupied already."

"I assure you, they are."

Holo shifted restlessly next to Lawrence, no doubt worried about where they would stay.

Whatever her abilities in wolf form, Holo's human form was just as susceptible to cold as a true human. She wanted to get out of the cold weather just as much as Lawrence did.

Lawrence had an idea.

"Ah, but the trade guilds will have made arrangements to put their members up for the great market, so I'll inquire with them," he said.

Contacting the trade guild would mean enduring endless questioning about Holo, so Lawrence would have preferred to avoid asking any favors from them, but it didn't seem like that would be possible.

"Oh, you are associated with a trade guild — might I ask which guild?" inquired the merchant.

"The Rowen Trade Guild out of Kumersun."

The young merchant's face brightened instantly. "What a wonderful coincidence! I, too, am a member of the Rowen Guild." "Ah, surely God has ordained this... Ah, I suppose such talk is taboo here."

"Ha-ha, do not worry. I, too, am a Church follower from the south."

The young merchant smiled, then gave a small, polite cough. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Fermi Amati, a fish dealer out of Kumersun. I go by Amati in business."

"I'm Kraft Lawrence, a traveling merchant — likewise, I go by Lawrence."

They each sat on their respective wagons, but were nonetheless close enough to shake hands.

Lawrence would now have to introduce Holo.

"This is Holo, my traveling companion. Circumstances have led to her accompanying me, though she is not my wife," said Lawrence with a smile. Holo inclined her head in Amati's direction, looking at him with a small smile.

Holo was quite something when she deigned to be polite.

A flustered Amati reintroduced himself, his cheeks flushed. "Is Miss Holo... a nun?"

"She is a nun on a pilgrimage or something like it, yes."

It wasn't only men whose hearts were stirred into piety; women also regularly went on pilgrimage.

Such women generally introduced themselves as nuns, rather than giving their true identity to townswomen on pilgrimage, since this tended to avoid various troubles.

However, as entering Kumersun dressed in clothes that were instantly recognizable as Church garb presented problems, the custom was to attach three feathers somewhere on the clothing. Holo's cloak indeed had three magnificent, brown chicken feathers pinned to it.

Despite his youth, Amati understood all of this instantly, hailing from the south as he did.

He did not inquire further, reasoning that the young woman probably had a good reason to be traveling with a merchant in such a fashion.

"In any case, the troubles we encounter on our journeys are naught but tests from the heavens. I say this because while I may be able to arrange for a single room, two rooms may unfortunately be difficult," said Amati.

Lawrence seemed taken aback at Amati's statement. Amati smiled and continued, "Surely it is by God's grace that we are of the same trade guild. If I inquire at an inn I've sold fish to, I'm sure I can arrange for a single room. Trying to arrange for a room through the guild will surely lead to all sorts of troublesome questions about your female companion from the old-timers."

"You're quite right, but I don't think we can impose upon you so."

"I'm a businessman, so naturally this is a business proposal. I hope that you will enjoy lots of delicious fish while staying at the inn."

Despite his youth, this Amati with his three wagonloads of fresh fish was clearly a man to be reckoned with.

This was the very image of a shrewd operator.

"You're quite a trader. We'll be happy to take you up on your offer," said Lawrence, half-jealous and half-grateful.

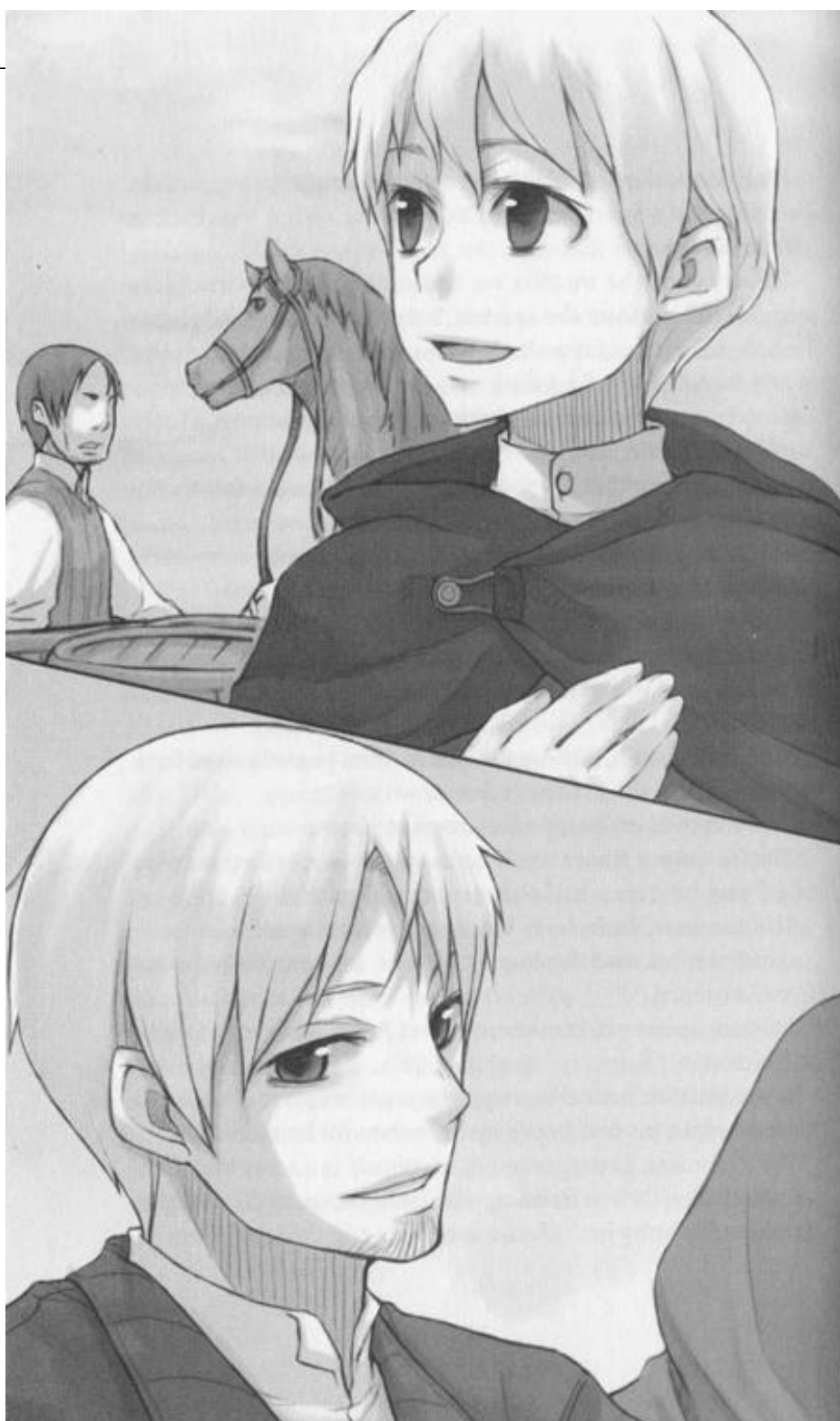
"Understood. Please leave the arrangements to me."

Amati smiled, and for just a moment, his gaze flicked away from Lawrence.

Lawrence pretended not to notice, but Amati had clearly looked at Holo.

It was possible he had been generous not only out of a shrewd business sense, but also from a desire to show his best side to Holo.

For a moment, Lawrence indulged himself in a sense of superiority, as he was the one traveling with Holo, but such silly thoughts would surely bring her ridicule upon him.



He banished the notion from his mind and gave his attention to the task of improving his relationship with the successful young fish merchant before him.

It was only as the sun began to set that they arrived, finally, in Kumersun.

The dinner table was arranged around a bowl of soup made with slices of carp and root vegetables, around which were situated a variety of shellfish dishes.

Amati the fish merchant's presence surely influenced the cuisine, which was quite different from the meat-based meals of the south. It was the steamed snails that stood out the most.

Sea snails were thought to aid longevity, whereas freshwater snails brought only stomach cramps, so they were avoided in the south, where only bivalve shellfish were eaten. The Church even forbade eating snails, claiming that evil spirits inhabited them.

However, that was more practical advice than it was the teachings of God as laid out in scripture. Lawrence himself had long ago become lost, and having arrived at a river, he resorted to eating snails. The memory of the excruciating stomach pain they caused him had made him avoid eating them ever since.

Fortunately the meals were not served in individual portions, and Holo seemed to enjoy the snails greatly.

Lawrence left all the food he couldn't stomach to Holo.

"Hmm. So this is what shellfish tastes like, eh?" said Holo, impressed, as she ate snail after snail, pried free from their shells with a knife Lawrence lent her. For Lawrence's part, he was digging into salt-broiled river barracuda.

"Don't eat too much, or you'll get a stomachache."

"Mm?"

"Evil spirits live in those river snails. Eat them carelessly, and you'll regret it."

Holo took a quick look at the snail she had just extracted from its shell, then cocked her head, and popped it into her mouth. "Just who do you think I am? It's not just the quality of wheat I can judge."

"Didn't you say something about eating spicy peppers and regretting it?"

Holo seemed to take offense at the reminder.

"Even I can't determine taste purely from appearance. They were bright red, I'll have you know - like a perfectly ripened fruit," said Holo as she extracted yet another snail. Occasionally she would pause to put her cup to her lips and take a drink, closing her eyes as she did so.

Since the region fell outside the Church's baleful eye, distilled liquor —which the Church felt was dangerous — was freely sold and drunk here.

Holo's cup was filled with a nearly transparent liquor known as burnwine.

"Shall I order you something sweeter?"

Holo shook her head wordlessly, but with her eyes so tightly shut, Lawrence was sure that if he peeked under her robe, he would find her tail fluffed out like a bottlebrush.

At length, she drained the cup, and exhaling deeply, she wiped the corners of her eyes with her sleeve.

Given what she drank (which was also known as "soul-shaking liquor"), it was good that Holo was no longer dressed as a nun. With her head covered by a triangular kerchief, she looked every inch

normal town lass.

Holo had changed clothes before dinner and come to give her regards to Amati once again. Amati's face was so pathetic from Holo's charms that not only Lawrence, but also the innkeeper had been unable to avoid laughing.

As if to add to her burden of sins even more, Holo greeted Amati with even more grace and charm than she normally used.

However, if Amati was to see Holo's ravenous eating and drinking, no doubt he would quickly awake from his dreams.

Holo sniffed. "'Tis a nostalgic flavor," she said, her eyes a bit teary, either from the liquor or the memories of her homeland.

It was true that the farther north one went, the more common such soul-shaking liquor.

"I can hardly tell any flavor at all when the liquors been so distilled," said Lawrence.

Perhaps tired of snails, Holo reached for the baked and boiled fish, answering happily as she did so.

"One forgets the sight of something after only ten years, but the taste and the scents linger in the mind for many tens of years longer. This liquor brings back many memories. It's not unlike the liquor of Yoitsu, you know."

"Strong drink is common in the north. Is this all you ever drunk?" Lawrence looked from the contents of the cup to Holo's face.

"Sweeter liquor hardly suits a wisewolf of such noble stature," she answered proudly, a bit of fish clinging to the corner of her mouth.

Of course, based on her appearance, it was sweet milk and honey that would best suit Holo, but Lawrence chuckled and agreed with her.

Surely the taste of the liquor had brought back memories of her homeland.

Holo's happy smile could not be explained away simply by the fact of their first delicious meal in some time.

Hers was the delight of a girl who had received an unexpected gift — the first concrete evidence that they were drawing near to Yoitsu and her home.

Yet Lawrence found himself looking away.

It wasn't that he was afraid of his gaze being noticed and of receiving the teasing that would surely follow.

The fact was that he heard Yoitsu had long since been razed to the ground; Lawrence had concealed this from Holo since the beginning of their partnership. Keeping this secret turned Holo's happy smile

into a blinding sun too painful to look at.

He couldn't bring himself to destroy the pleasant evening meal.

To avoid Holo noticing his turmoil, Lawrence forcibly turned his thoughts to other things. He smiled at Holo, who reached for the carp stew.

"I see you've taken to the stew?"

"Mm. Who would have guessed that carp, boiled, would be so tasty? Another bowl, please."

The large bowl holding the carp stew was outside Holo's reach, so Lawrence retrieved it for her, but each time he did so, more onions appeared on his wooden plate. It seemed that even boiled, Holo couldn't stand onions.

"Where'd you manage to eat carp? There aren't many places that serve it."

"Hm? I got it from the river. They're sluggish creatures, easy to snare."

Lawrence understood — she'd gone fishing in her wolf form.

"I've never had raw carp. Is it good?" he asked.

"The scales get stuck twixt my teeth, and there are too many bones. I'd seen fish swallow the smaller ones whole and so imagined them to be delicious, but in the end, they did not suit me."

Lawrence imagined Holo's huge form as she wolfed down a large carp headfirst.

Carp were renowned for their long life and were both revered as holy and reviled as tools of the devil by the Church. For that reason, the eating of carp was confined to the north.

To be fair, it seemed mildly ridiculous to hold the carp, with its moderate longevity, in such esteem when there were wolves like Holo wandering about.

"Human cooking is indeed good, but it's not just that — the fish was chosen very well. That Amati la has quite an eye."

"For his age, yes. And that was quite a load he was moving." "And on the other hand, there's you. What was it you're hauling, again?" Holo's eyes were suddenly cold.

"Hm? Nails. Like this table... Oh, I guess it doesn't use them." "I know what nails are. I'm saying you should've gone for something a bit more impressive. Or are you still reeling from your failure in Ruvinheigen?"

Lawrence felt rather aggrieved by this, but it was the truth, and so he could say nothing.

He had become overenthusiastic and bought armor on margin that amounted to roughly twice his personal net worth, and as a result, he had faced bankruptcy and lifelong slavery. In addition, he had caused Holo significant trouble and humiliation.

Having been humbled, Lawrence chose to buy simple nails on his way out of Ruvineigen, to the tune of about four hundred silver trenni. It was a conservative purchase that left him with quite a bit of cash on hand.

“It may not be the grandest load, but it should turn a fair profit. And it’s not as though there’s nothing attractive in my wagon.”

Holo cocked her head at Lawrence, holding a river barracuda in her mouth as though she were an alley cat.

Lawrence had come up with a nice bon mot.

He coughed slightly. “I mean, you’re riding in it as well, after all.”

It was a bit affected, but Lawrence flattered himself to think that it was a charming line nonetheless.

As he smiled, took a drink of his burnwine, and looked to Holo, he saw that she had stopped moving and seemed quite at a loss.

... Well, I suppose that’s about all you’re capable of,” she finally said with a sigh.

“You know, it wouldn’t kill you to be a little nicer to me,” said Lawrence.

“Ah, but if you treat a male too well, he’ll soon come to expect it all the time. And then you’ll hear naught but the same foolish words over and over.”

“Ugh..Lawrence couldn’t let this slight go unanswered. “Fine, then. From now on I’ll —”

“You dunce,” said Holo, cutting him off. “How precious do you think a male’s kindness is?”

“.....” Lawrence frowned and escaped into his drink, but Holo

was on the hunt now.

“And all I need do for your kindness is to seem downcast, nay?”

Her innocent face accused him, and Lawrence had no response.

Holo was unfair.

He looked at her, resentful, but she only smiled pleasantly.

Having finished their first proper meal in many days, Holo and Lawrence returned to their inn, where the streets were quiet.

They had arrived in Kumersun around sunset, but the streets had been much more congested than Lawrence anticipated.

If they hadn’t encountered Amati, they certainly would have had to prevail upon the trade guild for

room and might even have wound up staying in a room at the guild house itself.

All around the city, wooden carvings and wheat dolls, whose inspiration was unclear, lined the street with bands and jesters flooding even the narrowest of alleyways.

The great market that took place in the large plaza in the south end of the city had its hours extended and it bustled with an energy that befit the word festival. Even craftsmen who were normally not allowed to sell their wares here had stalls set up along the wide street.

Back in the inn, Lawrence opened the window to cool his body, still flushed from the strong liquor. He could yet see some shopkeepers tidying up their stalls, illuminated by moonlight.

The room that Amati had arranged for them was in one of the very finest inns in the town, one that Lawrence would never have considered staying at himself. The room was on the second floor overlooking the wide street that ran from north to south through the center of the city, not far from the intersection with the street's east-west counterpart. Just as Holo had hoped, it had two beds. Of course Lawrence could not help harboring a suspicion that the two beds of the room were also due to Amati's insistence.

It mollified Lawrence to think this, but he was still grateful for Amati's assistance, so he abandoned that train of thought and looked out onto the street.

Everybody on the wide boulevard seemed to be staggering home.

Lawrence chuckled and looked behind him to see Holo sitting cross-legged on the bed, pouring herself another cup of wine as if she hadn't already had enough to drink.

"Don't come crying to me if you're hungover tomorrow. Have you already forgotten what happened in Pazzio?"

"Mm? Oh, this is fine. Fine liquor never lingers past its welcome. And who am I to turn down my friendship?"

Now finished pouring, she happily put the cup to her lips, then ate a bit of dried trout left over from dinner.

Left to her own devices, Holo would most likely eat and drink herself into a stupor, but Lawrence was still grateful for her pleasant mood.

He had to broach a subject that was far from his favorite.

The reason he had altered his usual yearly route, which included Kumersun only in the summer months, was because he was heading for Holo's homeland.

Lawrence was not clear on precisely where Holo's home of Yoitsu was. Although he had heard of its name, that was in a story from ancient times, which provided no concrete sense of its location.

He had avoided pressing her for more information thus far, because every time the subject came up she would smile with nostalgia but soon sink into a depression at the realization of the distance, both

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