

# Spice and Wolf

## A Journey's Respite «Part 1 of 2»

### 「Spring Log」

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The snow-capped coniferous trees stood still like soldiers at attention. All was so quiet that even the chirping of birds was obnoxiously loud.

Had there been any clouds high above, he might have been drawn deeply into thought, but on today of all days the sky was as blue as the bottom of the sea.

He was uncertain whether the expression he wore was appropriate, so he cast his eyes down on his feet.

"Alright, let us proceed."

Hearing the voice, he turned around and saw that all the preparations had been completed.

The head priest with the stony expression hunched over in a bow. Behind him, two figures held up rods as tall as an adult man. The iron crests on those rods seemed especially heavy. Behind them were six other people, divided on either side of a coffin which they bore on their shoulders.

"May the Lord and Holy Ghost bless us."

With that solemn chant the priest began walking one deliberate step at a time, and after a brief moment of hesitation others began emerging from under the coniferous trees on either side of the lane.

Some had dressed appropriately for the occasion, while others had rushed there from work before they had time to change. Like timid fawns avoiding a person in the forest, they approached the coffin at the priest's gentle urging and whispered their farewells. No matter how brief their utterances, he could tell they were all sincerely from the heart. That made him recoil a little; it felt as though they were actually directing their words at him.

No, it was fine for him to accept their words. He realized that as they reached the bend in the lane and he instinctively looked back at the place where their march had begun.

There stood a building. When it was first built, it almost felt like it had a fighting spirit of its own, but time had sanded away its rough edges and it now felt as though it was just another part of the natural scenery.

Despite all of the help they had received to build this place, they were the ones who had protected it for all this time; that should have earned him the right to proudly push out his chest.

And lo, as though the conclusion he reached in his heart had been heard aloud, the two men in front of the coffin held their crested rods up high and the winter sun shone its dull light on the signboard.

The engraving on that signboard was "The lone wolf and -".

"It is with the Lord's guidance that we have arrived safely at this place, and so too shall our friend be guided to their eternal rest."

So proclaimed the priest, standing before the makeshift "church" that had hastily been crafted from a barn nestled here between the mountains in the countryside. All present respectfully lowered their gazes. Then with a nod, the priest signalled to the pallbearers to carry the coffin inside. However, he remained outside for a while; by the time he finally entered the coffin had already been placed before the altar. Everyone else was already passing by either side of him on their way out, as though giving him a patient berth. They closed the doors behind them, leaving him to wonder if that was their way of showing him compassion.

He slowly approached the altar and sat next to the coffin.

There, lying in a bed of flowers, was a face that even now he suspected might be gently snoring if he listened closely enough.

"Who would ever have thought that I would be the one attending your funeral service..."

Lawrence gently stroked the lightly powdered cheek in the coffin as he spoke.

"Holo."

A melancholy bell could be clearly heard tolling from the other side of those doors.

It was, after all, a clear and sunny winter day.





The scents of lunch still lingered in the dining hall as the soothing sound of a lute came in from the open-air bath.

He had been working non-stop since before the break of dawn, and only now in the late afternoon was he able to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Nyohira, the land of secluded hot springs, huh? Well, I guess that's true, but only the customers get to really enjoy this paradise."

Audible cracks were produced as Lawrence, the proprietor of the "Spice and Wolf" bathhouse, craned his head back. There was never any end to the hard work around here.

For instance, the customers were all the same; it did not matter how highly-ranked a clergyman they were, they were all just selfish in the end. They wanted to pray when they wanted to pray, and no matter what ridiculous time in the morning that was, Lawrence had no choice but to agree. That meant preparing the holy book, cutting candles so they matched heights precisely on their candlesticks, and covering the floor with a woolen sheet so the clergymen would not harm their ankles as they knelt for their extended prayers.

While they prayed, oblivious to his hardships, he then had to head to the hot spring and begin to clean it. Picking up the plates and utensils left behind by the previous customers who had been soaking in the spring until very late in the night, discarding their other trash, raking out any leaves that were now floating in the water, and pouring hot water on the now-frozen path from the main building to the spring. Sometimes he would even need to chase out animals that had snuck in for a soak themselves.

After all of those tasks were complete, smoke would begin pouring from the kitchen chimney, signaling the start of another battle: the battle to prepare breakfast. One might expect that clergy would prefer a modest breakfast, but no such luck. They ate and drank until they fell asleep, and yet even after that they expected a hearty breakfast after waking up.

Lawrence would fervently wash dishes at the side of his highly talented chef Hanna, who did the work of three regular people. There was no point in griping about the fact that the owner of an inn should not be the one washing the dishes. The two assistants who used to do these chores had left, and beggars could not be choosers.

When all that was done there was still the non-stop repetition of entertaining the customers who had come for breakfast, handing out towels and bathrobes to the ones now on their way to the spring, and even managing the musicians and dancers when they arrived. There were smaller and larger-sized baths, each earning different revenue, so he had to select which musicians and dancers would go where without causing any disputes.

If that wasn't enough he also had to prepare decorations like greenery and floral arrangements for the embroidered tent that made their hot spring inn seem even more fancy. Being stingy about such things would only cause a decline in revenue from customers, and with a decline in revenue the musicians and dancers would move on to other bathhouses. Nothing was lonelier than a bathhouse deprived of song and dance. Of course, dancers could not be made to dance on cold, wet stone floors, which meant drying the woolen carpets by the indoor fireplace a day in advance, and then spreading them out again when ready.

On top of that, as he finished washing the last plates that were used for breakfast, he would immediately have to begin preparing for lunch for those customers who liked theirs early.

It all felt like being inundated by heavy rain while having to catch every last drop, and one could not help but sometimes feel like it was all in vain. And yet, if one ran around like a chicken with its head cut off, it was possible to finish it all in time.

He just had to be patient for a short while until the commotion came to an end.

"Looks like another job well done, sir."

As Lawrence sighed in relief and sat down in a corner of the now-quiet dining hall, Hanna, a lady (it would be rude to call her a girl), approached him. Despite not having a great physique, and having worked all morning in that ruckus, she boldly stood tall without showing the slightest sign of fatigue. If one was told that she could raise a dozen children at once by herself, they would believe it. She had brought a tray with her, with a generous helping of baked beans, thick cuts of meat, and even some wine. The smoked meat still sizzled in oil, accompanied by plenty of garlic and mustard seeds, smelling so tantalizing it almost seemed sinful. Lawrence swallowed the saliva it had called forth, suddenly remembering that he had not had the chance to eat anything all morning.

"And thank you for your hard work as well, miss Hanna," replied the owner of the bathhouse. He would not forget to thank her before eating. She intentionally ignored his pleasantries, placed the food on the table and poured some wine into his cup. His tired body felt rejuvenated the very moment he scooped those highly-salted beans into his mouth.

"I don't really mind the work, given that the other two left so suddenly, but it would all be for naught if you were to collapse, sir."

The wine filled him with warmth as it washed down the salty taste, and was immediately followed by a piece of smoked meat that he had carved off and had begun to chew. Sir.. he had only recently finally grown accustomed to that label.

"Oh, I certainly intend to hire new help, but this commotion won't last much longer. It's nearly spring for those who live further down the mountain, after all."

"Oh my, is it almost that time of year already? The winter lasts so long on the mountain that it's easy to miss the change of season."

"Are you not looking forward to the coming of spring, Miss Hanna?"



Winter is always synonymous with perseverance to those who did not live in a place like this in the mountains, where the falling snow piles up deep.

Man, animal, and tree together felt powerless as they dreamed for the day when the spring finally came to set them free.

"It's not that I don't look forward to it, but when spring arrives everyone will empty out of here and descend the mountain until summer, no? It makes me feel so glum to consider that."

A wry smile appeared on Lawrence's face as Hanna crossed her arms and placed her hands on her cheek, staring off into the distance. For one to find purpose in life by keeping busy was something they shared in common, yet she took it to the next level. She was a reassuring presence as an employee, but her words stung Lawrence a little; they made him feel like just another person who could not wait for spring to come so they could rest their weary bones.

On the other hand, as a former traveling merchant with an aversion for wasting time, that time he had to idle waiting for winter to flee and yield to summer was like having a pebble in his shoe. At the very least he could win a few customers during that time and rest while earning some revenue, but that never went as well as he hoped.

"By the by, is the Missus still sleeping?"

It was well past noon already, yet the mistress of the bathhouse remained nowhere to be found. Lawrence rewarded himself by eating more baked beans, drinking more of the expensive imported wine, and chewing on more of the mustard-topped smoked meat before he replied.

"She is the type who can't stand waiting for spring, after all."

"Oh dear."

Hanna permitted herself a small laugh before returning to the kitchen, declaring "Then I shall begin the preparations for dinner."

Lawrence slowly finished his meal before washing his own dishes, filling a small cask with wine, and heading up to the second floor of the bathhouse, where their bedroom was located.

Most of the guests would be at the bath this time of day, so the building was more or less silent. It was not until he opened the door to their bedroom that he finally heard the sounds they made faintly through the open window.

"Hey, just how long are you planning on sleeping?"

The lump on the bed did not bother responding to his summons. She was surely curled up into a ball as usual, probably too lazy to even go close the window herself.

With an irritated sigh, Lawrence set the wine on the table with his paperwork and quill, but when she failed to respond to even that, he felt a tinge of worry.

"Holo?"

Not even his concerned call made her budge. He made his way to the bed and gently lifted the cover. The face of a girl in her teens lay there, now exposed. She normally schemed her way into seeming older by changing her hairstyle and clothing, but right now she might as well have been a child. With hair long enough to rival nobility, and no signs of age on her face, her pearly skin was the very image of a person who had never worked a day in their life. She lay there silently with eyes closed, motionless, as though completely free from pain or worry. It was the type of relaxed expression that a person would wish to leave behind when they died.

It was only when Lawrence ran his finger across her cheek that her ears finally twitched. Large, pointy ears. Triangular in shape, and a shade darker than her auburn-colored hair. In other words, an animal's ears, growing right there out of her head. Indeed she also had a thick, splendid tail growing out of her back. For despite appearing as a young maiden, her true form was that of a wolf large enough to swallow a person whole; she was a spirit who had dwelled within wheat for centuries.

By some strange twist of fate she was now his wife, and Lawrence could not thank God enough for that favor. Even so, his everyday life was far removed from what one might read in a fairy tale.

Despite her face remaining motionless, her ears were now turning this way and that, and the sight made Lawrence sigh once more and speak up.

"If it's food you want, then get up already and come down to the dining hall."

That was the utterance which finally caused a change in her expression. Her eyes pinched shut even tighter, her body shrank into an even smaller sideways ball, and her ears trembled atop her head. He did not have to see her tail to know that it too was trembling under the blanket.

"Fuaaa~"

With a lazy yawn, her eyes slowly opened.

"I do not wish to awaken..."

So she said, selfishly like a princess living a secluded life, before continuing.

"Each night of late... you have not let me sleep until the wee hours, hmm?"

She focused her gaze on him accusingly.

She had every right to do so.

"Well, that... I quite appreciate your part in that."

So he replied, before leaning over and bringing his face nearer hers.

"Then I suppose this is the proper way to rouse a sleeping princess, yes?"

As he kissed her on her cheek, her eyes once again shut, and her ears reacted as though being tickled.

After more than ten years living under the same roof, one would expect to grow sick of such things, and yet there was not even the slightest sign that they tired of it.

He laughed at that blissful thought, and she soon joined in.

"Oh, such fools we are."

"I realize that you're exhausted from having to go out every night, but get up already.. there's a lot of sewing to be done."

She finally gave in as he brought their conversation back down to earth. With one final yawn she crawled out from under the blanket. Assigning any other job to her would only result in endless complaints, but she rather unexpectedly took to needlework; her handiwork showed just how much care she put into it.

"Eek, 'tis cold!"

"Here, wear this."

Holo's entire body shivered as he dressed her in the woolen robe, then poured some wine and handed it to her.

"'Tis not enough!"

She was being as curt with her speech as a child.

"If you'd like more to drink, then eat first. It would leave a bad impression for the shop if the hostess was drunk by noon."

"Always such a stick in the mud..."

Holo grumbled as she nursed her wine.

"So, how'd it go last night?"

Lawrence respectfully wrapped his arm around her back as he asked, before leading her out of the bedroom.

"Lately you are always falling asleep before me."

She bumped him with her shoulder in a show of protest.

Lawrence coughed as he shifted to dodge her attack.

"That's not what I was talking about."

He quickly continued.

"But, um, well... it's not that my spirit is unwilling, it's just-"

"Oh ho... it is just that it is the busy-season, you mean to say?"

Lawrence could tell that she was being far gentler with her complaint than she could be, so he gently hugged her in turn, as though to promise he meant it.

"As for my inspection of the mountain-side last night, well, I daresay it went well enough. I have dealt with the snow that I suspected would pose the greatest danger."

"Is that so? Great work"

It had been constantly snowing of late, and with the arrival of spring there would be more sunlight, which raised the risk of an avalanche.

The number of travelers on the mountain roads increased this time of year. As such Holo had been reverting to her wolf form and inspecting key areas of the mountain over the past few nights.

Lawrence knew he could do nothing to help with this necessary task, so he bore his shame and relied fully on her power. At least for her it was a pleasant excuse to unwind by running around

in her wolf form. And as a bonus, she could always jump into one of the baths and revive her frozen body afterward, since she returned under the cover of night.

"The nights will surely be tiring until everyone has left the mountain. I'll be counting on you."

"It bothers me not. The chief selling-point of a bathhouse is that you leave with the same smile it puts on your face when you arrive."

It was impossible for one person to do all of the business of running a hot spring inn, yet with someone by your side all of that very hard work could transform into something quite pleasant indeed. Holo giggled like a little girl as Lawrence nodded back at her with a smile.

After descending the stairs, Holo uncomfortably donned a thin woolen headscarf. It hardly mattered much, as their customers tended to be drunk around the clock, but it was a wise habit to hide her ears nonetheless; the only people in Nyohira who knew of Holo's secret were the employees at their bathhouse.

Hanna had likely heard their footsteps, as she entered the dining hall as they did, serving Holo her meal with perfect timing. Compared to his meal, the amount of overall food on Holo's plate was the same, but he still wryly smiled as he noticed just how much more of hers was meat rather than beans. Lawrence considered himself to still be quite young, but anyone other than her would struggle to eat that much meat just after waking up.

That was something he had long since come to terms with, along with the difference in their lifespans, and the fact that she was the incarnation of a wolf who dwelled within wheat. And yet, moments like this made the differences between them feel even greater.

Understanding such implications was one thing, but feeling them in your bones was another matter entirely.

Each time such a thought crossed his mind, it strengthened his resolve to treasure the time they spent together even moreso.

"Oh, and incidentally, you..."

"Hmm?"

Because he was watching her enjoy her meat in such an ungraceful manner, she spoke her next words with a caring tone.

"Are you not the one here having the most difficulty? To be buried thusly by all that work, with nary any help in sight?"

"Oh, that? I'll manage. The busy-season won't last much longer, and I can't let myself abuse Cole's good nature. Who am I to stop him, if he says he wants to go on a journey?"

It had been over ten years since Lawrence had first become embroiled in various conflicts with Holo, and met Cole along the way. Back then Cole was a vagrant student wishing to study theology, despite appearing to be even younger than the maidenly Holo.

Cole was now a young man not much different from how Lawrence had been all those years ago; Lawrence could not help but feel the sting of time's swift arrow at that realization.

Tying down a person who still wanted to become a member of the clergy, despite all that he had witnessed, did not sit well with Lawrence.

Cole had immediately asked for leave to go on a journey after having listened to the story of a customer visiting them recently, and Lawrence felt there was nothing to do but cheer him on.

"Though I will admit that... I'd hoped he would have waited until spring..."

"Mhm.." agreed Holo, continuing between munches of her food, "Well, that Cole certainly keeps to himself. Were he to remain thinking about what made for the proper time to leave, he would dilly-dally indefinitely. Hence I feel you did no wrong by sending him away the moment the opportunity presented itself."

"Well, hearing you put it that way does make me feel better. Above all else, I'd rather not obstruct any youth with a bright future still ahead of them."

Holo snickered at his deliberate attempt to act wiser than his years as he refilled her tin cup with wine.

"Though I daresay none of us would ever have expected them to use that as a pretext to elope."

The loud "clang" heard right after that was that same tin cup and the wine-cask crashing down, spilling the wine on top of the table.

Lawrence reached for the objects in a desperate attempt to keep his own shame from spilling out like the wine, but there was no undoing what had already been done.

Hanna quickly rushed over with a dish-towel upon hearing the ruckus, as Holo howled with laughter.

"Oh ho ho.. such a fool you are! Can you still not accept it?"

"A-accept it?!"

Lawrence stiffly replied as he helped Hanna mop things up, and spied her trying to keep a smile from spreading across her face as well.

After Lawrence had cleaned up the mess and sat down in a chair, Holo twirled the blade of her knife in the air and turned to face him.

"That Cole is a proper male, is he not? Quite the candidate to inherit this place, no?"

"Ugh..."

Lawrence could not find fault with her reasoning; in fact there was no denying that she was right.



It was just that understanding the reality of a situation was not the same thing as having to accept it.

He had been painfully reminded of that truth on a daily basis.

On top of that, when it came time to discuss their daughter, there was no way Lawrence could remain calm. After all, they were not so busy lately simply due to having a good reputation among their clientele. It was because the two youngsters that had been helping him out had suddenly gone away, and he had no one else to fill their posts.

One of those youngsters was Cole. The other - the one he had not expected to leave - was his daughter with Holo, named Myuri.

She had fled from the bathhouse to follow Cole on his journey.

Her reason? Well, there was more than one reason, but only one of them was weighing so heavily on Lawrence's mind, and it was not one that had taken him by surprise. The village was small, after all, and the bathhouse even smaller. It was clear as day who had fallen for whom.

"But marriage? It's far too early for her."

He had used all of his mental might and that was all he could offer; even Hanna was now laughing along with Holo. Men were fools no matter how old they grew, was what they were clearly telling one another.

"And just what age would be appropriate for her?"

"Uh.. ugh.."

"Boss, you shouldn't strain yourself so."

He briefly agonized over whether Hanna had said that to tease him or encourage him, and chose to cover his ears in the end. Thinking about it any further would not help him now. He knew that. He really did. He had known this day would come even since his daughter had been born.

"Oh ho~. Well, at least 'tis comforting that the one she chose to elope with is Cole."

"They are NOT eloping!!"

Lawrence felt the need to strongly protest that fact. Holo and Hanna resumed their laughter. In that moment, Lawrence had never felt more strongly the urge to drink something extra-strong with the other inn owners.

"To begin with, I see not why she should hold back on confessing to the one she likes? If nothing else, my daughter should not be so slow."

It seemed that was Holo's version of "being jealous".

Still, he felt she had no right to judge others that way, remembering her own inability to speak her mind on their own journey over ten years ago. And yet he knew what would happen if he were to voice that objection, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Surely 'tis the influence of those church folk, given how many of them visit here."

"The church-folk?"

Holo circled her knife in response, as though reeling in a long thread of thought in her mind.

"Oh you know, that thing... that odd custom they share of never saying the most important things until their dying breaths?"

"Ah. You mean their final confession?"

"Indeed, that thing."

On their deathbed, they would meet a priest for a confession of their final sins to God, and to declare their last will and testament. However it was not unheard of that, for instance, a stubborn old man would tell the priest a secret to pass along to their family after their passing, such as the admission of an illicit love affair; that was what Holo was trying to say was the wrong mentality.

"I say 'tis pointless to say such important things after the time when they ought to be said."

Indeed, Lawrence agreed. Especially having aged enough to feel shivers at how quickly time had passed him by. The young needed to rush so life did not leave them behind. And yet that fact did not help him to agree with Holo: to him it was still far too soon for Myuri to pursue romance. The moment his mind reached that conclusion, Holo shifted topics.

"I should dearly like to see the face of my grandchild soon, as well."

"Huh? Wha-!"

Lawrence was so taken aback he could not properly breathe. Their grandchildren would undoubtedly be adorable, but Myuri was herself still a child. It did not matter how normal it was for girls her age to be wed in this day and age, it was still too early for her! That was final! If the rest of the world jumped off a cliff, they did not have to follow them.

Holo sipped her wine without a care in the world, despite Lawrence doing his best to resist the force of reality that was encroaching on him. Holo's lack of concern may simply have been because of the difference in their ages, or perhaps the difference of being the mother rather than the father.

She could still remain calm despite knowing that Cole had chosen to go on a journey, and had packed and descended the mountain, with that daughter of theirs who always spoke of wanting to see the outside running away from home by hiding in his luggage.

Journeys were always companions to danger, and so worried was Lawrence about his only daughter's safety that he had written a letter demanding her to return immediately, only to be chided by Holo and stopped from sending a sled for her as quickly as possible.

It would be alright, Holo had said.

Just let their cute little girl go and have fun, she had said. Lawrence simply could not reconcile whether that was the right thing to do, even after considering Holo's views; it was too much to

swallow. He was groaning constantly, despite Holo sitting beside him with her eyes closed as though soaking in the hot spring.

"At any rate, all shall be well as long as she enjoys her first adventure."

There was no way Holo was unconcerned, whether she acted like an irresponsible parent or not. Lawrence stared at her ruefully, not appreciating that she was trying to steal the role of the good parent from him entirely.

She shot him a sly smile and inched up next to him with a sigh.

"Everything else may change over time, however I shall always remain at your side."

Being shorter than him let her look up at him passionately with her beautiful eyes.

"Is that not satisfying enough for you?"

There was nothing he could possibly say after she used that tactic. To someone who had lived for centuries like her, everything before her now was nothing more than a lone chapter in her own travelogue. That fact was so painful to her that she had tried to leave him once before on their journey. It was inevitable that she would have to see him off some day, and so she had wanted to leave before that parting became too painful to bear. And yet she ultimately chose to bear that future pain to live some happiness in the now. All Lawrence could do was give up and let his tense shoulders drop.

"Nothing pleases me more."

"Oh ho~"

With a chuckle, she placed her head on his shoulder. In turn he placed his hand on the head of the one known as the Wise Wolf, noting once again that it was small and round enough that it naturally fit his palm.

He knew that the most happiness he could ever hope to hold was limited to that which could fit in his palm.

And, truth be told it was more than enough for him.

"More wine, then?"

She replied instantly, as though knowing what he would say.

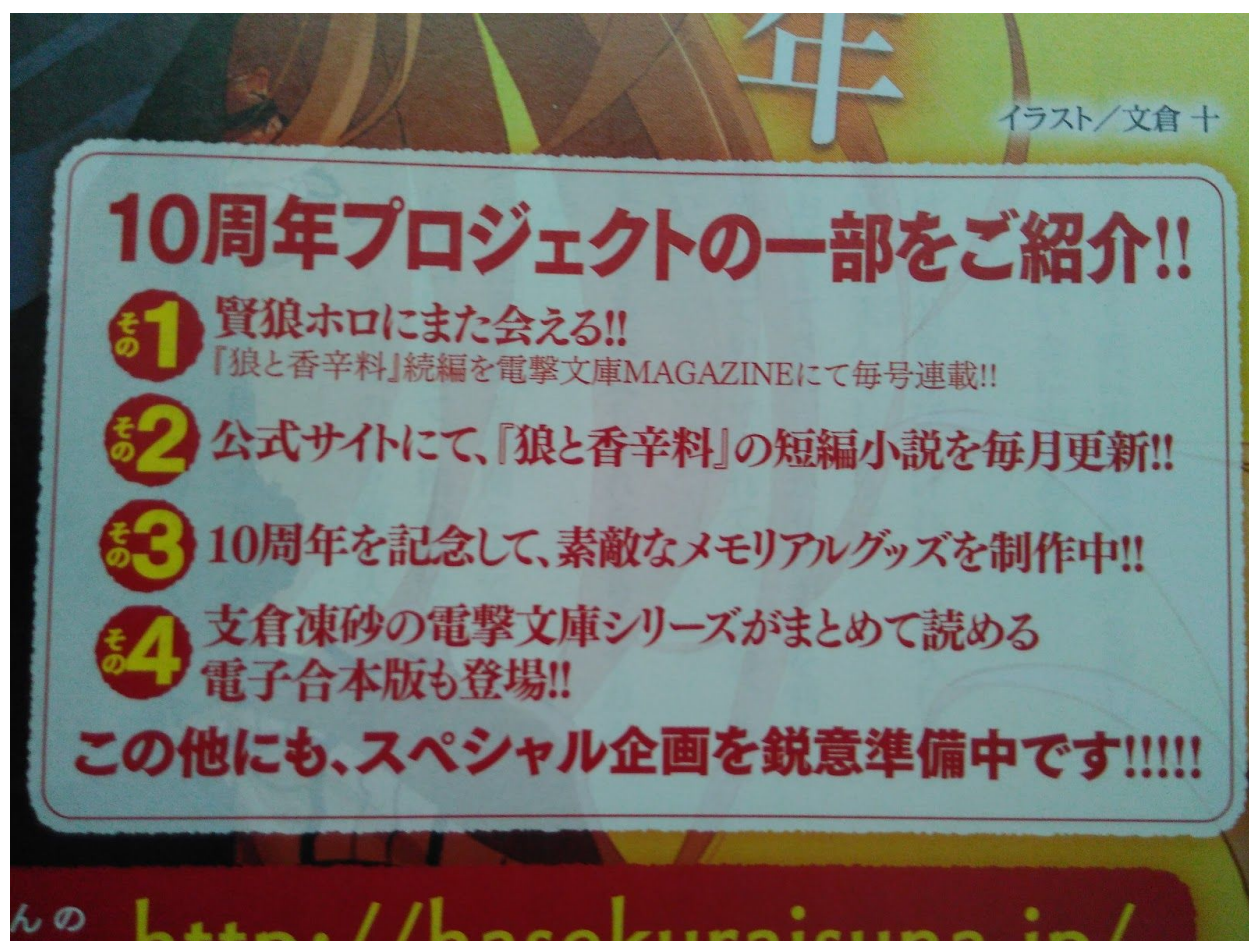
"Only if you accompany me."

The only thing he could do was laugh at how little of a chance he stood against her.

Hanna rolled her eyes as Lawrence held the now-empty wine cask out to her while kissing the top of Holo's head.

*To be continued...*

*Additional info from the magazine :*



1 - Spice and Wolf will be a serial publication in Dengeki Bunko MAGAZINE. You can meet Holo the Wise Wolf again.

2 - On the official page, it says a new Spice and Wolf **short story** will be added every month.

3 - For the 10th year anniversary, a lot of new commemorative goods are in production

4 - There will be a digital version of all Dengeki Bunko series for Hasekura Isuna works available soon.

And many other things.

# Spice and Wolf

## A Journey's Respite «Part 2 of 2»

### 「Spring Log」

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It just so happened that it was the night of the monthly village meeting. Lawrence shivered in the cold as he carried a plate and mug of ale with him down the road, with the moon popping out from behind trees as though spying on him. When he had first arrived here he could not shake how eerie it was to wander mountain roads during the night, but now it no longer fazed him.

Even if it did, there were still plenty of customers in the area this time of year, so the village was full of warm lights, laughter and the sound of music. It was so alike something from a fairy tale that it was difficult to believe; he would even sometimes bring Holo with him so she could share in the sight.

Along the way he would cross paths with and greet the popular dancers as they made their rounds from bathhouse to bathhouse. It had been ten years since he had settled here, and now it finally felt as though he had blended into this society.

But that came with its own merits and drawbacks.

"Ohhh! It seems we're finally graced by the presence of Mr. Lawrence!"

He was welcomed with applause as he entered the building marked by a raised torch, where the meetings were held. All Lawrence could do was stand there puzzled as several of the red-faced innkeepers came up to him and smacked him on the back.

"Weeeelll Mr. Lawrence, tonight let's drink the night away!"

"Wha...?" sighed Lawrence.

Even if he was ten years into his life here, and most of the innkeepers running their businesses were around his age, there were some who were older. He had no choice but to humor his elders, even if he would not act overfond of them; they were his business rivals, after all. There were times when he had to clash with them over building materials, so such strained social interactions were the norm.

Was this some special occasion? Just as the question crossed his mind, one of the men holding a glass of wine spoke up.

"It's gonna hurt for a while, Mr. Lawrence, but that pain won't last forever."

"Huh? What are you on about?"

"It's fine, it's fine. Having to let your daughter go is a pain we're all too familiar with."

"Hmm... ah, I see."

It now made sense to Lawrence why there were people lining up to offer him a drink. Most of them were fathers with daughters of their own.

"But no, I don't think it's been decided whether those two will-"

"Right, right! I completely understand why you don't wanna admit it!"

Another man anxiously laughed as he forced out that attempt to console Lawrence. And yet, Lawrence was still telling himself the same thing over and over: they are not eloping, they are not eloping.

"Oi, gents, sorry to spoil your fun, but can you please hold off on it until after the meeting?"

Everyone took a seat as the chairman clapped, as though he had roused them from a spell. Lawrence was hardly surprised to see a few of the men sobbing as they recalled the times that they too had given their daughters up for marriage; he flashed them an empathetic glance. Even if they shared a civil rivalry over profit, they were all still friends living in the same village.



"Now then, this'll probably be the last meeting we'll have this winter. Which means by next month the snow will have melted, people will have left, necessary building repairs and preparations for the summer will have begun, and we'll begin locking horns once again over the allotment of imports."

The innkeepers seated at the long table smiled uneasily. The road leading to Nyohhira village was narrow, and they could only rely on imports from Svernel, so it was indeed inevitable that they would all be locking horns.

"Oh, speaking of which, I've heard some interesting rumors."

A man held his hand up as he cut into the discussion.

"I've heard tell that there'll be a new hot spring town opposite us on the western side of the mountain."

"Oh, that? I've heard the same thing."

"Huh? Really?"

"On the other side of the mountain you say? What'll happen to our flow of customers?"

"Order, please!"

The chairman made his command to kill the commotion, casting a sudden silence on the room. Lawrence had also heard the same news from the musicians. They mentioned being uncertain that they could make it to Nyohhira next time.

"I too have heard of that, and it seems to be the truth."

Anxiety crept over the room like ants crawling over one's foot. Increased competition was nothing but bad news, and the most important thing to consider now was from where that new hot spring town would import their resources.

"On top of that, it seems likely they'll also procure their resources from Svernel."

"Dear god!" came a shout. Just as there was only so much water that could flow through a river, only so many goods could be taken deep into the mountains. In addition, if they too were importing their goods from Svernel, that meant their customers would also be taking the same road from Svernel to their hot springs: they would be competing for the same clients.

"A decade ago, we would be taking up arms and crossing the mountain right now."

The chairman's words washed over them like a wave, converting their anxiety into a round of laughter.

"But we're the proud people of Nyohhira, the highly renowned hot springs resort! Our baths can melt away any strife. We'll have no trouble attracting customers given our reputation."

Cries of "here here!" rang out in approval.

"But still, how shall we go about this?"

The room fell silent at the sudden question.

The chairman showed a tiny smile and coughed before turning his gaze to Lawrence.

"I see. Then I'd like to suggest that we seriously consider Mr. Lawrence's proposal from a while back."

Lawrence tensed up a little as everyone cast their eyes on him; he immediately knew what the chairman was referring to.

"Hmm, you mean the one to hold new social functions in the village?"

"Yes, that one."

Lawrence had proposed a few years prior that they should host events during the lulls in business in Spring and Fall. Those seasons were always crammed with festivals, special markets, and religious gatherings, so no one would bother heading all the way out to some isolated hot spring village.

As a result, the inns were so quiet that it was a huge waste to keep paying the employees they had hired for the winter; laying them off would make it difficult to rehire them when the summer rolled around, but with so few customers it was simply uneconomical to retain them. If there were events in the Spring and Fall that trumped interest in the ones people held in their own hometown, then they could count on enough customers to make ends meet.

"Why did we drop that proposal the first time around?"

One of the participants muttered thusly.

"Cause it's a hassle, I suspect. We'd rather rest up during the off seasons."

Back when Lawrence first made his proposal, he thought the innkeepers were trying to demoralize him by shooting it down, but he now empathized with their point of view. Earning a profit through constant travel was a different experience from the repetitive routine of running a bath house.

"And just like that, our leisurely attitude has left us without sure footing. This must be how the Church feels."

Hearing the chairman gravely speak those words made everyone cross their arms and nod in agreement.

Lawrence did not fully understand the details, but far from the mountains it seemed that the Church had reached a major fork in the road. They had already bled enough power over the past decade to have to end their wars against the pagans, and yet just as Lawrence thought peace was about to take root, news had come that villains were sprouting up inside the Church instead. Cole had been unable to remain after hearing that news from a customer. He said that he would regret it for the rest of his life if he missed the turning point of their era.

"We all know that with the war against the pagans over, Nyohhira has lost its allure of being some enchanted place deep in enemy territory, so we must hurry to make the next move."

The chairman may have been born here, but as a youth he had apprenticed with a huge southern trading company, and so had come to think like a southerner.

Regardless, what he said was the truth; no one voiced any objections, and instead they all clapped to show solidarity.

And yet they were only clapping to stall for time, as they knew what would follow.

"So, what shall we do?"

He reached out to the wine cask resting on the long table.

"Let's all put our heads together."

Despite the looming dread of crisis, there was no plan of action. Even if there was, once the village went all in on something, many practical problems would inevitably erupt forth and the one who had made the winning proposal would likely be left in charge of the whole mess.

The meeting naturally became a drinking party as they all exchanged ideas, and no one would blame them. It was a meeting held after the busiest time of the year, and doubled as a means for them all to unwind after their labor.

On top of that, Lawrence was present among all of those fathers with daughters who had heard that Myuri and Cole had "run away from home," so nothing at all would be accomplished that evening.

And yet, Holo's words had been stuck in the back of his mind ever since he had heard them from her that afternoon.

Everything changed over time.

One would regret not taking actions they were meant to take.

In that respect, Myuri was also trying her hardest.

Upon reaching that point, Lawrence forced down some wine to wash away the sentiment.

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He had managed to get through all of his daily chores, even if he felt like he was breaking down from the effort (especially his hangover from the meeting).

But once one customer left, two more would follow, and just like that almost all of them were gone.

Thanks to Holo's help there were no accidents caused by avalanches, and so Nyohhira could welcome spring without incident.

"Hmmm... there is nothing as fine as bathing under the sun."

Earlier that day a customer unwilling to leave had been dragged forcefully away by his servant, and Holo had leapt into the pool as though she had been waiting for that moment. With the musicians and dancers also having descended the mountain to their next job, she and Lawrence could rest their weary bones, free from the watchful gazes of others.

"Will you not join me? Your winter fatigue will be swept away."

"Hmm? Um....."

Lawrence replied noncommittally as he set down the smoked meat and liquor that had been chilled for Holo, along with the honey-glazed cheese a customer had recently recommended that had since become her favorite.

Rather than looking at her glistening skin his eyes were directed elsewhere.

"Foolish mule!"

"Whoa!"

He leapt back as he was splashed with water from the spring. In a panic he looked to confirm whether the letter he was holding was dry, only to find that it had since been snatched away from Holo as she suddenly emerged from the spring.

"Just how long do you plan to keep reading that letter like some maiden? They have already confirmed that they are fine, and even if they were to be caught up in something grand, it is them - they shall be just fine."

"Umm, ah, uhhh..."

His eyes remained fixed on the letter in her hand, like it was a treat taken away from a shepherd's dog. It was sent from Lenos, the place that he himself had been long ago caught up in a dispute over furs. It had been sent by Cole and Myuri. The first page was written half by Cole, then Myuri, and the second page had been written by both of them.

Cole's portion told of how he had descended the mountain only to learn that things were changing on an even larger scale than he had heard, and of how much remained to be learned. Myuri's was fraught with spelling errors as it spoke of how many people lived in the south, how lively it was, how much food there was, and how many interesting things were taking place.

Lawrence was grinning from ear to ear as he read Myuri's portion, but his face grew grim when he began reading the second page.

It recounted the troubles they had encountered in great detail. Every time Cole tried to calmly express something, Myuri would butt in to make it more colorful; Cole was trying to refrain from worrying Lawrence while Myuri wanted to embellish things, and had clearly done so quite a bit.

Ultimately they had been caught up in quite a stir yet had emerged unscathed, with Cole's belly shrinking from anxiety while Myuri enjoyed every second. On the one hand, Lawrence felt pity for the serious Cole, on the other he felt joy at Myuri's mirth, and between them he nearly relaxed and let himself smile, stopped only by his own apprehension and worry that something might befall them.

It was the same experience he and Holo had shared - a journey risking life and limb - but there was more to it than that.

"All told, t'would seem that the two of them have grown rather closer."

Holo chuckled as she re-read the letter she had snatched from Lawrence's hand. Anyone reading it would be able to tell how close they had grown. In the same room, under the same candlelight, foreheads close together, shoulder to shoulder over the letter as they fought...

"Yeah, that Cole... he makes for quite the big brother indeed."

Lawrence coughed as he spoke that term, having settled on it in order to remain calm.

"They've been more like siblings than the real thing since way back indeed."

Holo made no reply.

Lawrence stood his ground, despite her exasperation.

"Well, I shan't stop you if that is how you wish to view it."

"This one has been a fool since way back indeed", she sneezed under her breath.

She shoved the letter back at him as she shivered, then popped a bit of smoked meat into her mouth and hopped back into the water. Lawrence straightened the wrinkled letter that now bore an imprint of her fingertips; he smiled as he saw Myuri's clumsy handwriting, but his headache-like scowl returned as he actually recalled what the letter contained.

Even so, it was the first letter he had ever received from his daughter, so he tenderly folded it until he heard Holo's voice.



"Oh, and by the way, you. Have you decided on the Spring entertainment?"

"Hmm?"

"You are considering how to make this place more lively so the newcomers on the other side of the mountain will not steal our clients, are you not?"

His expression turned gloomy as he realized she was talking about what was discussed at the meeting.

"Not quite... I'm having a tough time thinking of something."

"The festival of the saint is already being held each year."

All towns and villages had a patron saint of some kind, for whom they would hold a yearly festival. Nyohhira's festival was held in the spring, though it was really more of a private party to reward themselves for their hard work over the course of the winter.

"It's really nothing special, though."

"Well, if it pleases you we could hold a festival to make offerings of tasty food to a rather large wolf... I would not mind."

As she spoke, Holo placed her elbows on the edge of the bath and put her head in her hands, splashing the water with her feet. Were she to bundle her hair up and act any more unladylike, she would be the spitting image of the maidenly Myuri.

"You wouldn't be able to finish any more than you're already being offered."

Honey-glazed cheese was quite a posh delicacy. Holo even snarled to show a fang at Lawrence as he plucked up a piece of it.

"Mhm. But you were a merchant who traveled from town to town, were you not? Surely you have seen one or two interesting events. Are there none that we may copy?"

"Hmmm... well, the bull-running festival was a fun one."

"Oh?"

"They sealed all the side roads and ran a bull down the main one. Everyone who managed to smack the bull's rear as it rampaged through town was considered lucky... it was quite the thrill. In the end, the bull became a feast enjoyed by everyone."



"Can we not do that here?"

"There will be injuries, and if that's not enough the bull will charge into homes and cause serious damage."

Travelers would find local festivities a lot more fun if they were accompanied by danger. Of course, Holo now owned a building and knew how much work it took to maintain it, so she showed the kind of doubtful expression one should wear while imagining a bull rushing through their home and tearing it apart.

"That... would be problematic."

"Wouldn't it?"

"Is there nothing else?"

"Well, there's this other one: during the festival you split folks up into teams based on their diocese, and march around town kicking a leather ball."

"That sounds interesting!"

"But everyone's head usually ends up bloodied in the struggle to keep hold of the ball. And if that wasn't enough, the folks around here aren't getting any younger. A lot of them'll probably give out soon after the game starts."

Holo's ears drooped as though she had recalled all the innkeepers' paunchy bellies, and agreed with Lawrence completely.

"Lately you have been giving out as well... or should I say filling out."

"Ahem. Well, that would only make our festival seem all the larger, but alas the idea isn't compelling enough to begin with."

"'Tis quite the predicament."

Holo splashed about again as she dog-paddled away from the edge of the bath. She seemed to not really care about it, given how she let her hair and tail billow in the water, but if that were the case she would not have brought the topic up to begin with.

It was her own way of caring for the bathhouse and the villagers. If she did not care then she would not bother to inspect the snow every night or quietly accept her sewing duties.

"Hmmm."

As Lawrence mulled over the problem, Holo climbed up on the islet in the spring with a splash, wrung the water hard from her hair, and wagged her tail.

"Why are you not coming in as well?"

Holo called out with that smile of hers, which was even more innocent than Myuri's. Lawrence shook his head defeatedly as he considered all the work he had yet to do, but gave in when she flashed him a lonely look, and took off his clothes.

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"Once one has lived the joy of being lazy like this, it's obvious they'll be unmotivated to come up with anything for the spring festivities."

So spoke Lawrence as looked up at the clear sky with chilled liquor in hand. He had ultimately called for Hanna to bring them drinks, only to end up lazily doing nothing. The knowledge that the other bathhouses were probably doing the same thing right now only made him even more lazy.

"As for I, t'would be my preference to doze in the prairies we traveled through as merchants."

"Of course you'd feel that way if you did nothing but snore loudly on the cart, while someone else held the reins."

"I did not snore!"

She had grown complacent enough to not even refute the fact that she had lazed around in the back of the cart.

"Ah... but still, this hot water's such a wonderfully relaxing thing. Whoever said there was no paradise on earth? Frankly I'm surprised everyone hasn't moved up here yet."

"You say that, but 'tis true that this place has been lively since I can remember."

Holo had soaked in Nyohhira's hot springs hundreds of years before Lawrence was even born.

"You know... one idea we could maybe use would be to get the Church to officially sanction this place as an earthly paradise."

"Whaa?"

Even as his eyes were saying "this just might work", Holo's seemed to be saying "there goes that fool, daydreaming again."

"Look, people come here on pilgrimage all the time, right? There are places of worship where popular saints miraculously cured the blind and such, so this place should qualify."

Despite his impassioned pitch, Holo simply poured more liquor as she sat next to him, as though ignoring him. After ten years, she was likely too used to how his schemes to get rich usually wound up getting them into trouble.

Of course, that did not mean he could keep quiet about them.

"Everyone knows that hot springs are good for you, so we just need to get the cooperation of the clergy who visit to get them to declare this place sacred. Yeah... yeah! It can even fit with the Church's teachings: opposite the Earth lies Hell, and between them a waypoint called Purgatory, where people who would be damned get the chance to go to Heaven instead. So why not also have a place between Earth and Heaven, called Nyohir-"

His mouth was suddenly stuffed with dried meat by Holo.

"Mmuffh?"

"Then just as this so-called Purgatory is where one confesses their sins to get into Heaven, they would come to your so-called paradise to drink and get into Hell, would they not?"

Holo's face had become quite red from the heated water and liquor, so together with her red eyes she could pass as the Devil.

"Uh... hmm..."

"And have the customers not already been complaining that it is too crowded? I doubt they would wish to help in making that problem worse."

".....ugh."

She was right.

"It seems that you, fool that you are, have already forgotten that we are only aiming to increase our visitors during the off-season, have you not?"

"Yeah, I have, huh?"

Liquor would very easily go to one's head while soaking in hot springs. Lawrence reached out and grabbed a handful of the snow beside the spring, pressing it to his forehead.

"Hmmmm... but that idea about the gap between Heaven and Earth still seems like a decent line of thinking to me."

"Is that gap not already filled by my angelic self?"

She laughed from deep in her throat as she shifted her body closer to his. Her pearly white skin and graceful form were undeniable signs of an angel. That said, the bit of dried meat hanging from her fang was also an undeniable sign: one to avoid being foolish enough to become such a creature's toy. But seeing her reach out to him as though she wanted him to say it was true, Lawrence could not help but feel like a fool wanting to be that toy.

"The gap between Heaven and Earth... a festival... hmmmmm..."

As he groaned with Holo next to him, she nibbled on the snow still stuck to his forehead, as though she felt she was beginning to boil. A moment later she raised her head and sprang out of the water.

"What's the matter?"

She pointed her chin toward the main building as she hurriedly dressed in a robe.

"Sir, you have a guest!"

Hanna had a visitor beside her as she called out. No one knew about Holo's lupine secret in the village, and she wanted to keep it that way.

"Ahh, yes! On my way!"

Lawrence climbed out of the hot spring, only to be surprised to see just who was standing at the entrance to the passage leading to the main building.

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Since it would be uncouth to serve this particular guest anything alcoholic, Lawrence asked Hanna to warm for them some goat's milk with a few drops of honey. They seemed lost in thought, having yet to move in their chair as they stared at their hands.

Holo's tail, now dry and puffy from being near the fireplace, swished under her robe as she walked up to Lawrence and poked him in the stomach. Her face was asking him what was going on, but having no idea he shrugged. The empty dining hall was silent save for the sounds Hanna was making while preparing dinner for Lawrence and Holo. Holo eyed their guest with keen interest, but left them to sit nearby and begin her sewing work.

At this rate they would get nowhere so Lawrence opened his mouth.

"Have you come today to relay a message from your father?"

Lawrence spoke respectfully to their visitor; despite still being young, he had already joined the workforce. However, the boy's shoulders dropped even lower and he shook his head gravely. He was the second son of the nearby bathhouse, around Myuri's age.

There were few people as young as Myuri in the village, so Lawrence knew him well due to how often the two had played together. Kalm was his name, and Lawrence had shouted it many times when Myuri had joined him for bouts of mischief.

The two played less now, having grown older and become busy with household chores, but they remained good enough friends that they would toss snowballs or frogs at one another when they met in the village.

"Please drink this before it gets cold."

Kalm reached for the mug at Lawrence's urging.

He then suddenly raised his head, as though it had reminded him of something.

"M-Mr. Lawrence, I came here to ask you for something!"

Lawrence was surprised not by his loudness, but rather his serious tone.

Kalm was the type who took offense and turned away whenever Lawrence scolded him for his and Myuri's shenanigans, yet here he was looking up at Lawrence with a look of utmost sincerity.

"If it's within my power, I'll be happy to do what I can."

Lawrence would not make light of the child sitting up straight and facing him.

"Well, uhmm, uhh..."

Unfortunately Kalm had run out of steam; his mouth remained open but no words were coming out. His face was red and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

Kalm soon closed his eyes and grit his teeth. Just as Lawrence was about to place his hand on his shoulder, he finally spoke.

"Please let me marry Myuri!"

The words echoed through the empty dining hall like a gale that had been called from all the might in his soul.

Lawrence was stunned for a brief moment before the meaning of those words sank in.

Marry... Myuri?

"Um, even if you ask me like that..."

Lawrence's mind had been thrown into disarray; he struggled to collect his thoughts.

Kalm's eyes remained locked on his the entire time.

They were the eyes of someone prepared for death.

"...Myuri... asking for her hand in marriage?"

Lawrence recovered enough to bear the boy's determination.

"Y-Yes."

Now that he knew Kalm was not joking, Lawrence quickly started thinking like a bathhouse owner.

"And what does your father have to say about this?"

Kalm seemed troubled by Lawrence's question, and shook his head.

The connections between families in a small village like theirs were a very serious matter. For starters, if a blood tie were to form between two famous bathhouses, it could form a dominant faction. So although there were no formal rules against marrying fellow villagers, an unwritten one was to marry someone from elsewhere, like Svernel.

Given the small population, it was also a precaution to keep blood ties from getting too thick.

"Hmm."

Kalm leaned in forward as Lawrence sighed, not knowing what to do.

"M-m-may I ask you one thing?"

"Which is?"

"Myuri... um, is Myuri... eloping?"

"Ugh."

Lawrence let out a deeper sigh, knowing full well that Holo would be laughing at him as she watched.

At least he could finally understand why Kalm had avoided discussing this with his parents, and had come here as though prepared for death.

"I'm... not really sure she's eloping. But there seems to be a good chance of it."

Even now Lawrence knew he was trying to avoid accepting that possibility, futile though his effort was.

"Though that just means it has yet to be confirmed."

He could state that plainly without it just being wishful thinking.

It was to show Kalm respect for having mustered the courage to come here and ask.

"That Myuri always does crazy things before she thinks them through. She also gets bored easily."

Kalm nodded in agreement, recalling his own experiences with Myuri.

"Knowing that, she might come back soon after having a huge fight."

If that was not enough, Cole wanted to be a clergyman enough to swear an oath of celibacy. He had not faltered even after being here long enough to turn down the advances of many a beautiful dancer.

"So when that time comes, you'll be able to ask your question again. I won't stand in your way."

Kalm's face briefly lit up as though a ray of sunlight had finally pierced a dark overcast sky, only to grow meek once more.

"But... my rival... is Cole, isn't it?"

Everyone knew each other in a small village like theirs.

The mischievous boy's expression became grim when Lawrence nodded. Surely his spirits sank upon confirming just who he was up against. Lawrence let himself chuckle as he recalled having had a similar experience back when he was still an apprentice peddler.

The boy before him could be a spiteful person aiming for his lovely daughter Myuri, but he was also courageous enough to have come here on his own.

"What I don't understand is why you're here all of a sudden?"

"Huh?"

Lawrence leaned in closer upon seeing Kalm's shocked reaction, as though trying to keep Holo from hearing them.

"I thought you fancied the dancers."

Kalm's face turned red and he whispered as though they two men sharing secrets. A hot spring resort needed song and dance, which meant attractive women. And these were girls who had lived the free life of an artist; they would not be frowned upon even if they were uncouth in a castle court. The beauty of one so carefree was brighter than a green meadow in the summertime that made one shield their eyes.

"Well, that's..."

He only hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"Well, I came to realize that those girls... aren't quite the same as Myuri."

Hearing that made Lawrence think about his daughter. Holo and Myuri seemed outwardly similar, but inwardly they were as different as could be. If one removed Holo's calmness and fox-like cunning, then they would get Myuri, who could turn unbridled pessimism into rays of sunshine like a fountain overflowing with cheer.

When she was young, she had chased a rabbit so single-mindedly that she had fallen down head-first into a creek and ended up bleeding. Yet the very next day she went off to the mountain to chase deer.

There was no doubt that from her very core, she was not the same as those dancing girls who tied their hair, wore perfume, cared for their figures, and smiled deliberate smiles. Lawrence had to admit that she was more like Holo.

"I suppose... it's like the difference between cats that live in a mansion and... a wolf that lives in the mountains, perhaps..."



He thought the world of his most cute and adorable girl, but he could not deny that she had her rough edges.

Kalm nearly burst out laughing upon hearing Lawrence's bitter claim, yet shook his head from side to side.

"Ah, no... I didn't mean it like that."

He began staring at his hands again.

"It's true that I used to like the dancers, but... they always leave the mountain during the off-seasons, and I never wonder if I'll even seen them again."

"Ohh?"

"Yet when I heard that Myuri had left the village, I felt... I felt..."

He winced as though hurt enough to shed tears.

"...that you couldn't bear to stay here and wonder?"

"..."

He could not say anything, and so just nodded as his lips trembled.

He was the same age as Myuri, and had always been around her like he was part of the family. There was a saying that people would not realize what they had until they lost it. Lawrence was not one of those people. During his travels as a peddler, rarely able to remain in a place for longer than a month, he could clearly see how town and village-folk felt at times like this.

Big events did not happen often in villages and towns. Things were the same today as they were yesterday, whether one was sick of it or not, year after year after year. Thus it made sense for a boy who had hit puberty and developed feelings for his inseparable childhood friend to keep tight-lipped about it. If he confessed and was rejected, the folks in town would keep bringing it up and would never let him live it down until he took it to his grave.

From that perspective this valiant boy was worthy of respect. Especially since his rival was none other than Cole.

Lawrence was looking at Kalm and seeing a man.

"So I know what I should do... what I should have already done."

Kalm's hands balled up into tight fists as tears fell from his eyes.

"Just like I knew what I should have done back when my brother died of that illness."

Kalm's brother had succumbed to a fast-spreading disease; Lawrence knew him as well. Though he hesitated for a moment, Lawrence placed his hand on Kalm's shoulder as the boy sobbed.

"The things that should be said... should be said as soon as possible... or you may never get the chance to say them... I'd learned that already... and yet..."

Lawrence smacked the boy's shoulder and used that arm to reach around and give him a hug. The smell of his sweat and the shape of his torso were completely different from Myuri's, but Lawrence suspected that if were to have a son of his own then this is how it might feel to hug him... the thought moved Lawrence deeply.

Holo, having read the situation, brought a hand towel to Lawrence, and Lawrence smacked Kalm again on the back.

"Myuri's still alive, you know."

The boy continued sobbing.

"If it were up to me, I'd relish kicking out everyone who came after my daughter."

Kalm flinched a bit despite knowing Lawrence was joking. Holo would surely muse about how adorably boyish the two of them were being, but Lawrence knew he was a fine business owner regardless of what others may say.

"I'd ask why you're not just going after her right now, but that would be downright irresponsible of me."

Lawrence held Kalm down to keep him from jumping up right then and there, and handed him the towel.

"No matter how Myuri may seem, she's a flighty one, so it's likely she'll come back after gallivanting around with Cole."

He could picture the tired grin that would be on Holo's face from hearing him say that, but there was a kernel of truth in his words. Especially since Cole was highly unlikely to even lay his hand on her without Lawrence's permission.

"So you just need to keep growing into a fine man for when that time comes. And then... and then..."

He could not bring himself to say "you can come back and ask for her hand again," but Kalm gripped the towel tightly and did so.

"I will return again to ask for Myuri's hand in marriage."

He could tell that Kalm's determination was the kind that would not falter even if he took a few punches.

And so he let his tense shoulders relax and chuckled with a nod.

"I'll be waiting. I'll be practicing my punches until then."

Lawrence was smiling, but Kalm did not look away even if he was shivering.

"Well then, wipe away your tears and finish your drink."

"Y-Yes!"

Lawrence placed his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his palm, watching Kalm do as he was instructed.

He felt it would not be so bad to have such a good kid as his own son.

"Feel free to wash your face in the spring. We don't want your keen-eyed younger brother to figure things out, now do we?"

"N-No we don't... thanks."

If an older brother acted tough and boasted only to return home with tears in his eyes, he might as well be a wounded deer surrounded by a pack of wolves. Kalm stood up and bowed before heading out to the spring.

Lawrence kept smiling as he watched the boy leave his sight, at which point Holo came into view and wordlessly sat in his lap.

"Wh-what?"

"Hmmm... hehehe."

Holo was happily laughing as her tail fluttered under her robe.

"My foolish mule, putting on such a prideful act..."

She took his hand, clearly wanting to keep him from replying.

"I shan't belittle you for handling such a thing in an uncharacteristically clever manner."

"I suppose I'll just have to take that as a compliment."

"Fool."

Her concealed ears rubbed against her hood as they drooped down affectionately. The events that had just transpired must have struck a chord in her heart.

Lawrence hugged her a bit more tightly while his thoughts trailed off.

"There may not be a next time, huh?"

Kalm's older brother had died far too young, and the memory of it was still fresh in Lawrence's mind. And even without that he would have felt the profoundness of the concept, being a former traveling merchant who had lived his days treasuring each encounter like it might be his last.

"For a boy so young to already be aware of that means that he shall grow up to be a fine male indeed."

"I'm sure you realize that I'm aware of it as well."

He felt that parting ways even once with Holo would mean never seeing her again, so he was always reaching his hand out to hers.

However, Holo inched away from him while staring into his eyes. Her accusing glare disappointed him.

"What? I'm only telling the truth."

"You always foolishly present past events in such a way as to only reveal your good side."

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Just how long did it take for you to openly declare how much you really, really, really, really love me, hmm?"

"..."

Her playful bites always stung. They would leave an even unsightlier mark if he resisted and tried to shift the blame at all, justified or not. Still, no matter how harshly she glared at him, her tail was always wagging like a dog just wanting to play.

It could be rather painful to love someone this much, he mused like a poet, but when his mouth opened to speak the words she so wanted to hear, he changed his mind.

"...unable to say what you really want to say...?"

"Hmm? Huh? What on Earth are you babbling about?"

Holo wore an expression showing that she had expected to be fed honey-pickled strawberries, only get black pepper instead. Lawrence was staring right past her as his mind connected all of the dots in his head while his hand waved to and fro. He remembered hearing something recently that was very similar to what he had just said.

Not being able to say what you wanted to say, except at such a time when you had no choice but to be honest.

A final confession! Of course!

One would spill everything when on the verge of death, with only time enough left to fully confess their sins so they could go to Heaven. And yet just now, he and Holo had demonstrated that it was not always a bad thing to refrain from saying what one really wanted to say.

If that was the case...

"If that's the case..."

"Hey, you? Heeeeeeeey youuuuuu!"

He took Holo's hand, which had been slapping him across the face, and cradled her like a princess as he stood up. All the dots had connected. An idea had blossomed in his mind for how they could win more clients during the off-seasons.

"That's it! We just need to make a dance floor that gets people a bit closer to Heaven!"

He bellowed as Holo stared back dumbfounded, still held in his arms.

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Funerals are farewell ceremonies.

Once a casket is closed, and a prayer spoken as it is laid into the ground, that will be the last time the one inside will ever be seen again.

As their coffin is carried out to rest, they will be showered with final farewells from others. It is not the time for lies, shame, or holding back.

Farewells can force things out that are normally be too difficult to admit; there is something truly powerful about them.

"Holo..."

Lawrence called the name, but could not suppress the wry smile forming on his face.

Despite all the preparations and everyone's consideration in leaving him alone in the barn, this was still difficult for him.

"Ugh... even this angel has a limit to her patience."

From within the casket came the moans of the deceased.

Lawrence gently coughed and peeked inside to see her giggling, then spoke.

"I was blessed from the very moment I met you."

"...was?"

She stole a glance at him with one eye, doing what she could to find fault in his words.

"This *is* supposed to be a funeral, you know."

"Hmph."

"Although at this funeral, the deceased shall be revived thanks to the miraculous effects of the hot spring water."

He dipped his finger into the still-hot water that he had intentionally brought in a silver cup, and dabbed it on Holo's forehead.

"So how does it feel to be resurrected?"

Holo opened both of her eyes to look up at him, her entire face contorted as though she was about to break into laughter.

"It feels happy, knowing that I have more time to spend with you."

"Hng..."

He was at a loss for words; he had not expected that from her. She revealed a fang as if to say "gotcha!" Just as always, he really was no match for her.

"I'm honored."

He helped her up as he continued.

"So what do you think of this for the festival?"

"Hmm?"

"You'll never hear any of the nice things others say at your funeral when you really die, and you won't get another chance to say what you really want to say. So why not hold a funeral before you die and speak your mind, in a ceremony that gets you closer to Heaven?"

"Hmm. Hmmmmm. Well,"

She scrutinized him with a scowl.

"For you, 'tis not bad at all."

"Hahaha, that's a relief! And we now know that it won't need any extraordinary preparations, nor cause any commotion, so this was well worth trying out."

The other inn owners had been uneasy and startled when Lawrence had first proposed this plan, but as he explained it in detail they grew excited. All of them had one or two things they wanted to tell their loved ones, yet were too embarrassed after too much time had passed, so they too understood the value in saying things as soon as possible. Now they felt they had an excuse to go ahead and say those things.

On top of that, odds were good that the world was full of men as stubborn as they were.

And so, in this secluded place as near to Heaven as possible, people could hold a funeral while they yet lived as an appropriate excuse. All according to Lawrence's plan.

"The candles will cost a lot, so we'll have to keep an eye out there... also the participants will need appropriate clothes for the event, which we'll have to factor into the costs... but it's doable... yeah, it's completely doable."

He suddenly realized that Holo had been watching him as he sorted his thoughts out.

Once again he had fallen deeply into thoughts of business without taking her into consideration; he gathered himself up as Holo giggled and reached out like a sleepy girl to tug on the edge of his shirt.

"Truly... I am..."

"Eh?"

"Happy to still be alive."

She was still smiling, but a tear rolled down her cheek.

In a fluster, Lawrence wiped the tear away.

"This means our journey will continue, does it not?"

Everything changed over time. Holo too had become just another leaf floating on time's river. One day they would inevitably have to bid their final farewell, and the moment they had together would become lost in eternity.

But that was a future that had yet to come.

Lawrence wrapped his arms around Holo and embraced her, as though trying to protect her as best he could from the flow of time.

"It does."

A moment later, he continued.

"Our journey will go on, even if it only for a little while."

Holo raised her head in laughter. The two then awkwardly shifted around until they found a natural position, with neither one leading the other.

It felt rather like the time the two had decided to open their own shop together.

Before the altar, under the watchful eyes of God, they shared a kiss.

When their eyes opened, they found that even after all these years, they had still blushed.

There was much business they still wanted to finish on this Earth.



Spring was just around the corner; t'was the season for things to thaw.

**\*\* The end \*\***

Translator note:

Hope you enjoyed the latest series of Spice and Wolf. The next publication will be in June, so see you then. I will keep on translating, unless someone better comes to the fold. Add me on twitter @moonlightcube if you are inclined. I could use more people whom I can stalk.