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A GIRL'S FORM ILLUMINATED BY THE MOON.
EARS ATOP HER HEAD.
THE EARS OF AN ANIMAL.

"MM. 'TIS A GOOD MOON.
HAVE YOU ANY WINE?"
— THE GOD OF THE HARVEST.
HOLO THE WOLF





"I'M GLAD YOU'RE ALL RIGHT."
"SO LONG AS YOU CARRY THAT
WHEAT WITH YOU, I'LL NOT DIE."

SPICE & WOLF

VOL. 1



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P ROLOGUE



In this village, when the ripened ears of wheat sway in the breeze, it is said that a wolf runs through them.

This is because one can make out the form of a running wolf in the shifting stalks of the wheat fields.

When the wind is too strong and the stalks are blown over, it is said that the wolf has trampled them. When the harvest is poor, it is said that the wolf has eaten it.

It was a nice turn of phrase, but it had a troublesome aspect that flawed it, she felt.

Still, lately it was a popular sort of expression, and there were few remaining who wielded it with the sort of familiarity or awe it had held in the past.

Although the autumn sky that was visible between the swaying stalks of wheat had not changed in hundreds of years, conditions below that sky had indeed changed.

The villagers who tended the wheat as the years passed lived for seventy years at the most.

Perhaps it would be worse for them to go centuries without changing.

Maybe that is why there is no need for them to honor the ancient agreement, she thought.

In any case, she knew she no longer had a place here.

The mountains that rose in the east caused the clouds over the village to drift mostly north.

She thought of her homeland beyond those drifting clouds and sighed.

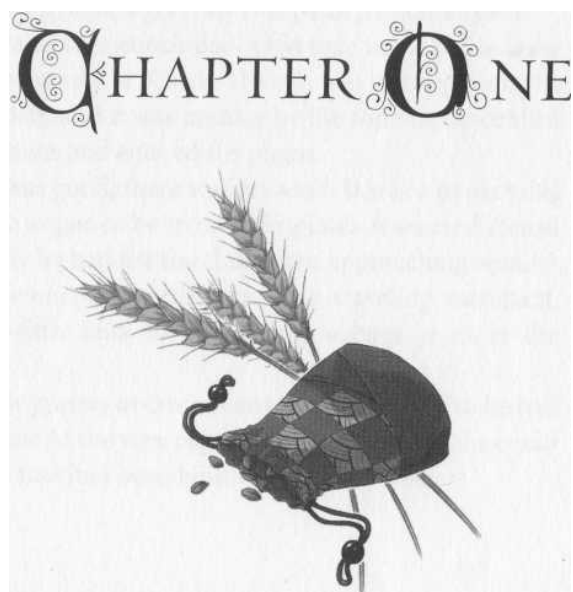
Returning her gaze from the sky to the fields, her eyes fell upon her magnificent tail, which twitched just past her nose.

With nothing better to do, she set to grooming it.

The autumn sky was high and clear.

Harvest time had come again.

Many wolves were running through the wheat fields.



“So that’s the last, then?”

“Hm, looks like ... seventy pelts, on the nose. Always a pleasure.”

“Hey, anytime. You’re the only one who’ll come this far into the mountains, Lawrence. I should be thanking you”

“Ah, but for my trouble I get truly fine pelts. I’ll come again.” The usual pleasantries concluded, Lawrence managed to leave the village just around five o’clock. The sun was just beginning its climb when he left, and it was midday by the time he descended from the mountains and entered the plains.

The weather was good; there was no wind. It was a perfect day for dozing in the wagon as he crossed the plains. It seemed absurd that only recently he had felt the chill of the approaching winter.

This was Lawrence’s seventh year as a traveling merchant, and his twenty-fifth since birth. He gave a huge yawn in the driver’s box.

There were few grasses or trees of any notable height, so he had an expansive view. At the very edge of his field of vision, he could see a monastery that had been built some years earlier.

He didn’t know what young noble was cloistered in this remote location. The masonry of the building was magnificent, and unbelievably it even had an iron gate. Lawrence seemed to remember that roughly twenty monks lived there, attended to by a similar number of manservants.

When the monastery had first been built, Lawrence had anticipated fresh clientele; the monks were somehow able to secure supplies without employing independent merchants, though, so his dreams were fleeting.

Admittedly the monks lived simply, tilling their fields, so trade with them would not be especially

profitable. There was another problem in that they would probably solicit donations and leave their bills unpaid.

As far as simple trade went, they were worse partners than out-and-out thieves. Still, there were times when trade with them was convenient.

Thus Lawrence looked in the direction of the monastery with some small regret, but then his eyes narrowed.

From the direction of the monastery, someone was waving at him.

“What’s this?”

The figure did not look like a manservant. They wore dark brown work clothes. The waving figure was covered in gray clothing. His deliberate approach likely meant some hassle, but ignoring him could make matters worse later. Lawrence reluctantly turned his horse toward the figure.

Perhaps having realized that Lawrence was now headed his way, the figure stopped waving but made no move to approach. He appeared to be waiting for the cart’s arrival. It would hardly be the first time that a Church-associated person demonstrated arrogance. Lawrence was in no mood to take every such insult personally.

As he approached the monastery and the figure became clearer, Lawrence muttered in spite of himself:

“ . . a knight?”

He at first dismissed the idea as ridiculous, but as he drew nearer he saw that it was unmistakably a knight. The gray clothing was in fact silver armor.

“You, there! What’s your business here?”

The distance between them was still too far for conversation, which is why the knight yelled. He apparently felt no need to introduce himself, as if his position were obvious.

“I am Lawrence, a traveling merchant. Do you require my service?”

The monastery was now directly in front of him. He was close enough to count the number of servants working in the fields to the south.

He also noted that the knight in front of him was not alone. There was another one past the monastery perhaps standing guard.

“A merchant? There’s no town in the direction you came from, merchant,” said the knight haughtily, sticking out his chest as if to display the golden cross that was engraved there.

But the mantle draped over his shoulders was gray, indicating a knight of low rank. His blond hair looked freshly cut, and his body did not look as if it had been through many battles; so his pride most likely came from being a new knight. It was important to deal with such men carefully. They tended

be excitable.

So instead of replying, Lawrence took a leather pouch out of his breast pocket and slowly undid the twine that held it closed. Inside were candies made of crystallized honey. He plucked one out and popped it in his mouth, then offered the open bag to the knight.

“Care for one?” “Mmm,” said the knight, hesitating momentarily before his desire for the sweet candy won out.

Still, perhaps because of his position as a knight, a considerable amount of time passed between his initial nod and when he actually reached out and took a honey drop.

“A half-day’s travel east of here there’s a small village in the mountains. I was trading salt there.”

“Ah. I see you’ve a load in your cart. Salt as well?”

“No, but furs. Look,” said Lawrence, turning around and removing the tarp that covered his load, revealing a bundle of magnificent marten pelts. A year’s salary of the knight before him was paltry compared with its worth.

“Mm. And this?”

“Ah, this is wheat I received from the village.”

The sheaf of wheat in the corner of the mountain of furs had been harvested in the village where Lawrence had traded his salt. It was hardy in cold weather and resisted insects. He planned to sell it in the northwest, where crops had sustained heavy frost damage.

“Hm. Very well. You may pass.”

It was a strange way of speaking for someone who’d summoned him over so high-handedly earlier, but if Lawrence were to meekly say, “Yes, sir,” now, a fine merchant he’d be.

“So, what occasions your post here, sir knight?”

The knight’s brow knitted in consternation at the question and furrowed still deeper as he glanced at the bag of honey drops.

He was well and truly caught now. Lawrence undid the bag’s string closure and plucked out another sweet, giving it to the knight.

“Mmm. Delicious. I should thank you.”

The knight was being reasonable. Lawrence inclined his head gratefully, using his best traders smile.

“The monks have caught wind of a big pagan festival that’s approaching. Thus the increased guard. Do you know anything of this festival?”

If his face had betrayed any hint of his disappointment at the explanation, calling it a third-rate

performance would have been generous. So Lawrence only affected a pained expression and answered “Sadly, I know nothing.” This was of course a huge lie, but the knight was just as mistaken, so there was nothing for it.

“Perhaps it truly is being held in secret, then. Pagans are a cowardly lot, after all.” The knight was so mistaken it was amusing, but Lawrence merely agreed and took his leave.

The knight nodded and thanked him again for the honey drops.

Undoubtedly they had been delicious. Most of a knight’s money went to equipment and lodging; even an apprentice cobbler lived a better life. It had surely been a long time since the knight had eaten anything sweet.

Not that Lawrence had any intention of giving him another piece.

“Still, a pagan festival, they say?” Lawrence repeated the knight’s words to himself once the monastery was well behind him.

Lawrence had an inkling of what the knight was talking about. Actually, anyone from this area would know about it.

But it was no “pagan festival.” For one thing, true pagans were farther north, or farther east.

The festival that happened here was hardly something one needed knights to guard against.

It was a simple harvest festival, of the sort to be found nearly anywhere.

True, this area’s festival was somewhat grander than the typical celebration, which is probably why the monastery was keeping an eye on it and reporting to the city. The Church had long been unable to keep control over the area, which undoubtedly made it all the more nervous about goings-on.

Indeed, the Church had been eager to hold inquisitions and convert heathens, and clashes between natural philosophers and theologians in the city were far from rare. The time when the Church could command the populace’s unconditional submission was vanishing.

The dignity of the institution was beginning to crumble — even if the inhabitants of the cities said nothing, all were gradually beginning to realize it. In fact, the pope had recently had to petition the monarchs of several nations for funds when tithes had come in below expectations. Such a tale would have been preposterous even ten years before.

Thus the Church was desperate to regain its authority.

“Business everywhere will suffer,” said Lawrence with a rueful smile, popping another honey drop into his mouth.

The western skies were a more beautiful golden hue than the wheat in the fields by the time Lawrence arrived in the plains. Distant birds became tiny shadows as they hurried home, and here and there the frogs sang themselves to sleep.

It appeared that the wheat fields had been mostly harvested, so the festival would undoubtedly begin soon — perhaps even as soon as the day after tomorrow.

Before Lawrence lay the expanses of the village of Pasloe's fertile wheat fields. The more abundant the harvest, the more prosperous the villagers. Furthermore, the noble who managed the land, one Count Ehrendott, was a famous area eccentric who enjoyed working in the fields himself. Naturally the festival also enjoyed his support, and every year it was a riot of wine and song.

Lawrence had not once participated in it, though. Unfortunately, outsiders were not permitted.

"Ho there, good work!" Lawrence called out to a farmer driving a cart heaped high with wheat in the corner of one of the fields. It was well-ripened wheat. Those who had invested in wheat futures could breathe a sigh of relief.

"What's that?"

"Might you tell me where to find Yarei?" Lawrence asked.

"Oh, Yarei'll be over yonder — see where the crowd is gathering? That field. It's all youngsters at this place this year. Whoever's slowest will wind up being the Holo!" said the farmer good-naturedly, his tan face smiling. It was the kind of guileless smile a merchant could never manage.

Lawrence thanked the farmer with his best trader's smile, and turned his horse toward Yard's place.

Just as the farmer had said, there was a crowd gathering within its confines, and they were shouting something. They seemed to be making sport of the few who were still working the field, but it wasn't ridicule at their lateness. The jeering was part of the festival.

As Lawrence lazily approached the crowd, he was able to make out their shouting.

"There's a wolf! A wolf!"

"A wolf lies there!"

"Who will be the last and catch the wolf? Who, who, who?" the villagers shouted, their faces so cheerful one wondered if they were drunk. None of them noticed Lawrence pulling his cart up behind the crowd.

What they so enthusiastically called a wolf was in fact not a wolf at all. Had it been real, no one would have been laughing.

The wolf was the harvest god, and according to village legend, it resided within the last stalk of wheat to be reaped. Whoever cut that stalk down would be possessed by the wolf, it was said.

"It's the last bundle!" "Mind you, don't cut too far!"

"Holo flees from the greedy hand!"

"Who, who, who will catch the wolf?"

“It’s Yarei! Yarei, Yarei, Yarei!”

Lawrence got off his wagon and peered at the crowd just as Yarei caught the last bundle of wheat. His face was black with sweat and soil as he grinned and hefted the wheat high, threw his head back, and howled.

“Awoooooooo!”

“It’s Holo! Holo, Holo, Holo!”

“Awoooooooo!”

“Holo the wolf is here! Holo the wolf is here!”

“Catch it, now! Catch it quick!”

“Don’t let it escape!”

The shouting men suddenly gave chase after Yarei.

The god of the bountiful harvest, once cornered, would possess a human and try to escape. Capture it and it would remain for another year.

None knew if this god truly existed. But this was an old tradition in the area.

Lawrence had traveled far and wide, so he put no stock in the teachings of the Church, but his faith in superstition was greater even than that of the farmers here. Too many times had he crossed mountains only to arrive in towns and find the price of his goods dropping precipitously. It was enough to make anyone superstitious.

Thus he didn’t bat an eye at traditions that true believers or Church officials would’ve found outrageous.

But it was inconvenient that Yarei was this year’s Holo. Now Yarei would be locked in a granary stocked with treats until the festival was over — close to a week — and would be impossible to talk to.

“Nothing for it, I suppose . . .” said Lawrence, sighing as he returned to his wagon and made for the village head’s residence.

He had wanted to enjoy some drinks with Yarei and report on the events at the monastery, but if he didn’t sell the furs that were piled high in his wagon bed, he wouldn’t be able to pay for goods purchased elsewhere when the bills came due. He also wanted to sell the wheat he’d brought from the other village and couldn’t wait around for the festival to end.

Lawrence talked briefly of the midday happenings at the monastery to the village head, who was busy with festival preparation. He politely declined the offer to stay the night and put the village behind him.

Years before the Count began to manage the region, it had suffered under heavy taxes that drove up the prices of its exports. Lawrence had bought some of this unfavorably priced wheat and sold it for but a meager profit. He hadn't done it to win favor with the village, but rather because he simply didn't have the resources to compete with the other merchants for the cheaper, finer grain. Nevertheless, the village was still grateful for his business then, and Yarei had been the middleman for the deal.

It was unfortunate that he couldn't enjoy a drink with Yarei, but once Holo appeared Lawrence would soon be chased out of the village as the festival came to its climax. If he'd stayed the night, he wouldn't have been able to stay long. As he sat on his wagon, Lawrence felt a sense of loneliness at being excluded thus.

Nibbling on some vegetables he'd been given as a souvenir, he took the road west, passing cheerful farmers returning from their day's work.

Having returned to his lonely travel, Lawrence envied the farmers with their friends.

Lawrence was a traveling merchant and twenty-five years old. At twelve he'd apprenticed under a relative, and at eighteen he set out on his own. There were many places he had yet to visit, and he felt that the true test of his mettle as a trader was yet to come.

Like any number of traveling merchants, his dream was to save enough money to open a shop in a town, but the dream still seemed distant. If he could seize upon a good opportunity it might not be so, but unfortunately the larger traders seized such opportunities with their money.

Nevertheless, he hauled loads of goods across the countryside in order to pay his debts in a timely fashion. Even if he saw a good opportunity, he lacked the wherewithal to seize it. To a traveling merchant, such a thing was as unreachable as the moon in the sky.

Lawrence looked up at the moon and sighed. He realized such sighs were more frequent lately, whether as a reaction to years of frantic trading simply to make ends meet, or because recently he'd gotten slightly ahead and was thinking more about the future.

Additionally, when he should have been thinking about little else besides creditors, payment deadlines, and getting to the next town as quickly as possible, thoughts chased one another through his head.

Specifically, he thought of the people he'd met in his travels.

He thought of the merchants he had come to know when visiting a town repeatedly on business and the villagers he had become acquainted with at his destinations. The maidservant he'd fallen for during a long stay at an inn, waiting for a blizzard to pass. And on and on.

In short, he longed for company more and more frequently.

Such longing was an occupational hazard for merchants who spent the better part of a year alone in a wagon, but Lawrence had only recently begun to feel it. Until now, he'd always boasted that it would never happen to him.

Still, having spent so many days alone with a horse, he started to feel that it would be nice if the horse could speak.

Stories of carthorses becoming human were not uncommon among traveling merchants, and Lawrence had since the beginning laughed off such yarns as ridiculous, but lately he wondered if they could be true.

When a young merchant went to buy a horse from a horse trader, some would even recommend a mare with a completely straight face, “just in case she turns human on you.”

This had happened to Lawrence, who’d ignored the advice and bought a sturdy stallion.

That same horse was working steadily in front of him even now, but as time passed and Lawrence grew lonely, he wondered if he mightn’t have been better off with a mare after all.

On the other hand, that horse hauled heavy loads day in and day out. Even if it were to become a human, it seemed impossible that it would fall in love with its master or use its mysterious powers to bring them good fortune.

It would probably want to be paid and given rest, Lawrence mused.

As soon as this occurred to him, he felt that it was best if a horse stayed a horse, even if it did make him selfish. Lawrence smiled bitterly and sighed as if tired of himself.

Presently he came to a river and decided to make camp for the night. The full moon was bright, but that did not guarantee that he wouldn’t fall into the river — and if that happened, calling it a “disaster” would be an understatement. He’d have to hang himself. That kind of trouble he didn’t need.

Lawrence pulled back on the reins, and the horse stopped at the signal, heaving two or three sighs as it realized its long-anticipated rest was here.

Giving the rest of his vegetables to the horse, Lawrence took a bucket out of the wagon bed and drew some water from the river, setting it before the animal. As it happily slurped at the bucket, Lawrence drank some of the water he’d gotten from the village.

Wine would’ve been nicer, but drinking without a partner only made the loneliness worse. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t get staggering drunk, either, so Lawrence decided to go to bed.

He’d halfheartedly nibbled on vegetables most of the way, so he had only a bit of beef before hopping back in the wagon bed. Normally he slept in the hempen tarp that covered the bed, but tonight he had a wagonload of marten pelts, so it would be a waste not to sleep in them. They might make him smell a bit beastly in the morning, but it was better than freezing.

But jumping right into the pelts would crush the wheat sheaf, so in order to move them aside, he whisked the tarp off the wagon bed.

The only reason he didn’t shout was because the sight that greeted him was flatly unbelievable.

"..."

Apparently, he had a guest.

“Hey.”

Lawrence wasn't sure his voice actually made a sound. He was shocked and wondered if the loneliness had finally broken him and he was hallucinating.

But after he shook his head and rubbed his eyes, his guest had not disappeared.

The beautiful girl was sleeping so soundly it seemed a shame to wake her.

“Hey, you there,” said Lawrence nonetheless, returning to his senses. He meant to inquire what exact would motivate someone to sleep in a wagon bed. In the worse case, it might be a village runaway. He didn't want that kind of trouble.

“. . . hrm?” came the girl's defenseless response to Lawrence, her eyes still closed, her voice so sweet that it would make a poor traveling merchant — accustomed only to the brothels of the cities — lightheaded.

She had a terrifying allure despite her obvious youth, nestled there in the furs and illuminated by the moonlight.

Lawrence gulped once before returning to reason.

Given that she was so beautiful, if she was a prostitute, there was no telling how much he could be taken for if he was to so much as touch her. Considering the economics of the situation was a tonic far more effective than any prayer. Lawrence regained his composure and raised his voice once again.

“Hey, you there. What are you playing at, sleeping in someone's cart?”

The girl did not awaken.

Fed up with this girl who slept so obstinately, Lawrence grabbed the pelt that supported her head and jerked it out from under her. The girl's head flopped into the gap left by the pelt, and finally he heard her irritated squawk.

He was about to raise his voice at her again, but then he froze.

The girl had dog ears on her head.

“Mm . . . hah ...”

Now that the girl seemed to be finally awake, Lawrence summoned his courage and spoke again.

“You there, what are you doing, climbing in my wagon bed?”

Lawrence had been robbed more than once by thieves and bandits as he crossed the countryside. He

considered himself bolder and more courageous than the average person. He wasn't one to quail just because the girl in front of him happened to have the ears of an animal.

Despite the fact that the girl hadn't answered his questions, Lawrence did not pose them again.

This was because the girl, slowly awakening before him and entirely naked, was unspeakably beautiful.

Her hair, illuminated by the moonlight in the wagon, looked as soft as silk and fell over her shoulder like the finest cloak. The strands that fell down her neck to her collarbone drew a line so beautiful it put the finest painting of the Virgin Mary to shame; her supple arms were so fine they seemed carved from ice.

And exposed now in the middle of her body were her two small breasts, so beautiful they gave the impression of being carved from some inorganic material. They gave off a strangely vital scent, as if housed within her arresting charm was a warmth.

But such a fascinating spectacle could just as soon go awry.

The girl slowly opened her mouth and looked skyward. Closing her eyes, she howled.

“Auwooooooooooooo!”

Lawrence felt a sudden fear — it blew through his body like a wind.

The howl was the song a wolf would use to call its comrades, to chase and corner a human.

This was no howl like Yarei had uttered earlier. It was a true howl. Lawrence dropped the bite of beef from his mouth; his horse reared, startled.

Then he realized something.

The moonlit girl's form — with the ears on her head. The ears of a beast.

“. . . Hmph. 'Tis a good moon. Have you no wine?” she said, letting the howl fade away, drawing her chin up, and smiling slightly. Lawrence came back to himself at the sound of her voice.

What was before him was neither dog nor wolf. It was a beautiful girl with the ears of such an animal though.

“I have none. And what are you? Why do you sleep in my cart? Were you to be sold in town? Did you escape?” Lawrence meant to ask as authoritatively as he could, but the girl did not so much as move.

“What, so you have no wine? Food, then . . . ? My, such waste,” said the girl unconcernedly, her nose twitching. She spied the bit of beef Lawrence had almost eaten earlier, snapping it up and popping it into her mouth.

As she chewed it, Lawrence did not fail to note the two sharp fangs behind the girl's lips.

“Are you some kind of demon?” he asked, his hand falling to the dagger at his waist.

As traveling merchants often needed to convert large amounts of currency, they often carried their money in the form of items. The silver dagger was one such item, and silver was known as a holy metal, strong against evil.

However, when Lawrence put his hand to the dagger and posed his question, the girl looked blankly at him, then laughed heartily.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Me, a demon now?”

Her mouth thrown open wide enough to drop the piece of meat, the girl was so adorable as to be disarming.

Her two sharp fangs only added to her charm.

However, being laughed at made Lawrence angry.

“How is that so amusing?”

“Oh, it’s amusing, it is! That is surely the first time I’ve been called a demon.”

Still giggling to herself, the girl picked up the meat again and chewed it. She did have fangs. Add in her ears, and it was clear enough that she was no mere human.

“What are you?”

“Me?” “Who but you would I be talking to?”

“The horse, say.”

“...”

When Lawrence drew his dagger, the girl’s smile disappeared. Her red-tinged amber eyes narrowed.

“What are you, I say!”

“Drawing a blade on me now? How lacking in manners.”

“What?!”

“Mm. Ah, I see. My escape was successful. My apologies! I had forgotten,” said the girl with a smile — a completely guileless and charming smile.

The smile didn’t particularly sway him, but nevertheless Lawrence somehow felt that pointing a blade at a girl was an unseemly thing for a man to do, so he put it away.

“I am called Holo. It has been some time since I’ve taken this form, but, well, it is quite nice.”

As the girl looked herself over approvingly, Lawrence was so caught on the first half of what she’d

said that he missed the second half.

“Holo?”

“Mm, Holo. A good name, no?”

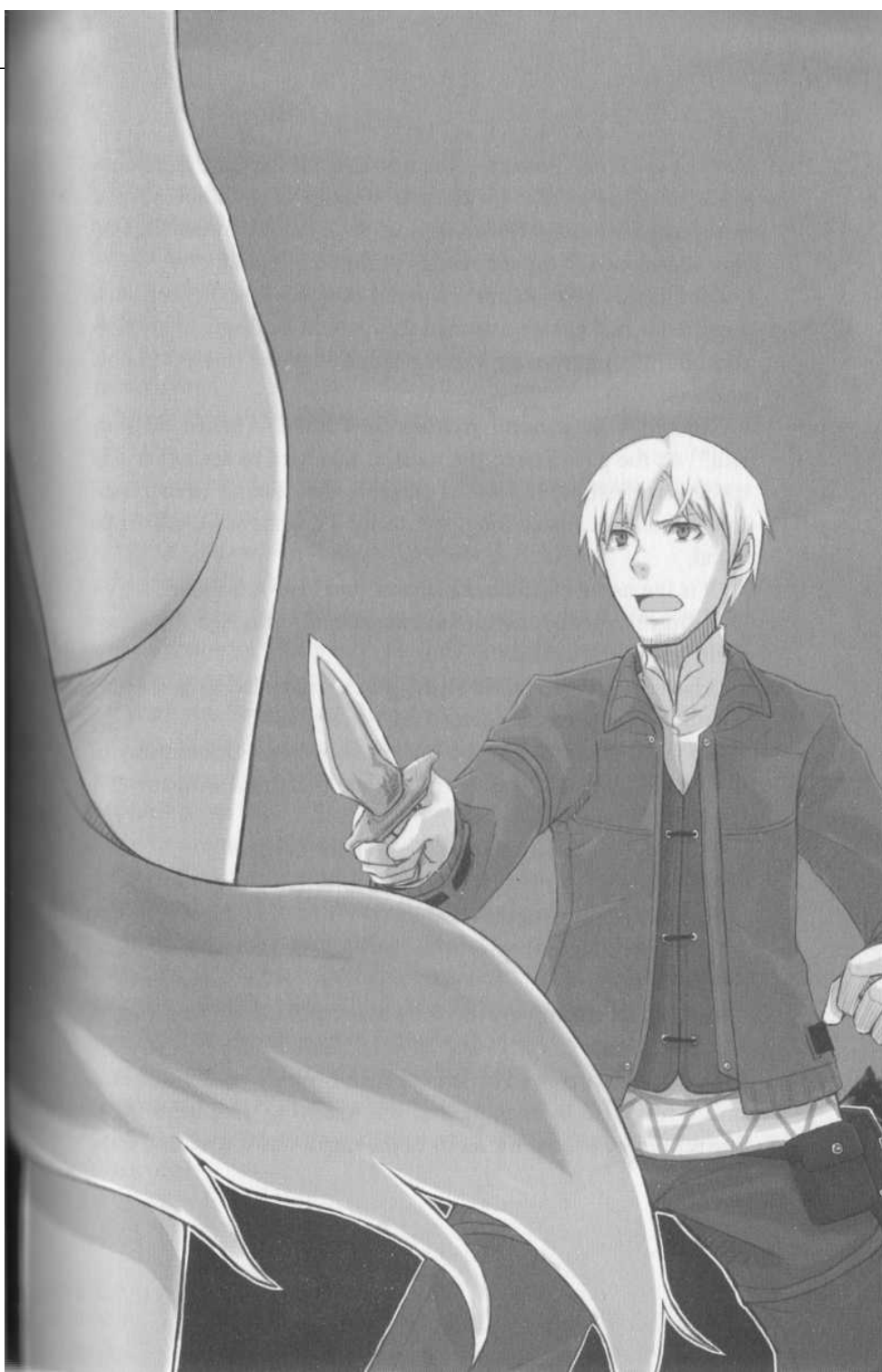
Lawrence had traveled far and wide over many lands, but there was only one place where he’d heard that name.

None other than the harvest god of the village of Pasloe.

“What a coincidence. I also know of one that goes by Holo.”

It was bold of her to use the name of a god, but at least this told him that she was indeed a girl from the village. Perhaps she’d been hidden, raised in secret by her family, because of her ears and fangs. That would fit with her claim to have “escaped successfully.”

Lawrence had heard talk of abnormal children like this being born. They were called demon-children and it was thought that a



devil or spirit had possessed them at birth. If the Church discovered them they — along with their families — would be burned at the stake for demon worshipping. Such children were thus either abandoned in the mountains or raised in secret.

But this was the first time Lawrence had ever actually seen such a child. He had always assumed they would be disgustingly bestial, but judging from appearance alone, this one was a plausible goddess.

“Oh, ho, I have never met another Holo. Whence do they hail?” As the girl chewed the meat, it was hard to see her trying to deceive anyone. It seemed possible that having been raised in confinement for so long, she really did believe herself to be a god.

“It is the name of this areas harvest god. Are you a god?”

At this, the girl’s moonlit face was slightly troubled for a moment before she smiled.

“I have long been bound to this place and called its god. But I am nothing so great as a deity. I am merely Holo.”

Lawrence guessed that this meant she’d been locked away in her home since she was born. He felt a certain sympathy for the girl.

“By Tong,’ do you mean that you were born here?”

“Oh, no.”

This was an unexpected answer.

“I was born far to the north.”

“The north?”

“Indeed. The summers there are short and the winters long. A world of silver.”

Holo’s eyes narrowed as she seemed to gaze into the distance, and it was hard to imagine that she was lying. Her behavior as she reminisced about the lands of the north was too natural to be an act.

“Have you ever been there?”

Lawrence wondered if she was counterattacking, but if Holo was lying or merely repeating things she heard from others, he would have been able to tell immediately

His travels as a merchant had in fact led him to the far north before.

“I’ve been as far as Arohitostok. The year-round blowing snow is terrifying.”

“Hm. Haven’t heard of it,” replied Holo, inclining her head slightly.

He’d expected her to pretend to have knowledge. This was strange.

“What places do you know?” he asked.

“A place called Yoitsu.”

Lawrence forced himself to say, “Don’t know it,” to quell the unease that rose within him. He did know of a place called Yoitsu, from an old story he’d heard at an inn in the north.

“Were you born there?” he asked.

“I was. How is Yoitsu doing these days? Is everyone well?” Holo asked, slumping slightly. It was such a fleeting gesture that it couldn’t be an act.

Yet Lawrence could not possibly believe her.

After all, according to the story, the town of Yoitsu had been destroyed by ursine monsters six hundred years ago.

“Do you remember any other places?”

“Mmm . . . it’s been so many centuries ... ah, Nyohhira, there was a town called Nyohhira. It was a strange town, with hot springs. I would often go to bathe in them.”

There were still hot springs in the north at Nyohhira, where royalty and nobility often visited.

But how many people in this area would even know of its existence?

Ignoring Lawrence’s confused reverie, Holo spoke as if she were even now relaxing in the hot water, then suddenly she sneezed.

“Mm. I do not mind taking human form, but it is unavoidably cold. Not enough fur,” said Holo, laughing and hiding herself again in the pile of marten pelts.

Lawrence couldn’t help laughing at her appearance. There was something that still worried him, though, so he spoke to Holo as she snuggled into the fur pile.

“You said something about changing forms earlier — what was that about?”

At his question, Holo poked her head out of the pile.

“I meant just what I said. I haven’t taken human form in some time. Charming, no?” she said with a smile. Lawrence couldn’t help agreeing, but he kept a straight face as he replied. The girl could make him lose his composure, that was certain.

“Aside from a few extra details, you’re a human. Or what else? Are you a dog turned human, like the stories of horses turning human?”

Holo stood at the slight provocation. Turning her back to him, she looked over her shoulder at him and responded steadily.

“You can doubtless tell from my ears and tail that I am a proud wolf! My fellow wolves, the animals of the forest, and the people of the village all acknowledge me. It is of the white tip of my tail that I am proudest. My ears anticipate every misfortune and hear every lie, and I have saved many friends from many dangers. When one speaks of the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, they speak of none other than me!”

Holo sniffed proudly but soon remembered the cold and dove back under the furs. The tail at the base of her back was indeed moving.

Not just ears, then — she had a tail as well.

Lawrence thought back on her howl. It was a true wolf’s howl, unmistakably. Was this then truly Holo, wolf-god of the harvest?

“No, it can’t be,” muttered Lawrence to himself as he reconsidered Holo. She seemed unconcerned about him as she narrowed her eyes in the warm furs. ~~Seen thus, she was rather catlike, although that was not the issue at hand.~~ Was Holo human or wasn’t she? That was the question.

People who were actually possessed by demons didn’t fear the Church because their appearance was different — rather they feared it because the demon within them could cause outward calamities for which the Church made it widely known the penalty was death at the stake.

But if Holo was instead a transformed animal like in the old tales, she might bring good fortune or perform miracles.

Indeed, if she was the Holo, god of the harvest, a wheat trader could ask for no finer companion.

Lawrence turned his attention back to Holo.

“Holo, was it?”

“Yes?”

“You said you were a wolf.”

“I did.”

“But all you have are a wolf’s ears and tail. If you are truly a transformed wolf, you should be able to take a wolf’s form.”

Holo stared absently for a while at Lawrence’s words before something seemed to occur to her.

“Oh, you’re telling me to show you my wolf form.”

Lawrence nodded at the truth of the statement but was in fact mildly surprised.

He had expected her to either be flustered or to flatly lie.

But she had done neither, instead looking simply irritated.

His expression of irritation was far more persuasive than the clumsy lie — the assurance that she could transform — that he expected.

“I don’t want to,” she said plainly.

“Why not?”

“Why do you want me to?” she shot back, pouting.

Lawrence winced at her retort, but the question of whether Holo was human or not was an important one to him. Recovering from his stumble, Lawrence put as much confidence as he could muster into his voice, trying to regain the conversational initiative.

“If you were a person I would consider turning you in to the Church. Demons cause calamity, after all. But if you are really Holo, god of the harvest, in human form, then I needn’t turn you in.”

Were she genuine, well — tales of transformed animals acting as envoys of good fortune still remained. Far from turning her in as a demon, he would happily offer her wine and bread. If not, the situation would be different.

As Lawrence spoke, Holo wrinkled her nose, and her expression grew darker and darker.

“From what I have heard, transformed animals can change to their original forms. If you are telling the truth, you should be able to do so as well, yes?”

Holo listened with the same irritated expression. At length she sighed softly and slowly extracted herself from the pile of furs.

“I have suffered many times at the hand of the Church. I’ll not be given over to them. Yet —”

She sighed again, stroking her tail as she continued. “No animal can change its form without a token. Even you humans need makeup before you can change your appearance. Likewise, I require food.”

“What kind of food?” “Only a bit of wheat.”

That seemed more or less reasonable for a god of the harvest, Lawrence had to admit, but her next statement brought him up short.

“That, or fresh blood.”

“Fresh . . . blood?”

“Only a bit, though.”

Her casual tone made Lawrence feel that she couldn’t be lying; his breath caught, and he glanced at her mouth. Just a moment ago, he’d seen the fangs behind those lips bite into the meat he’d dropped.

“What, are you afraid?” said Holo at Lawrence’s trepidation as she smiled ruefully. Lawrence would’ve said “Of course not,” but Holo was clearly anticipating his reaction.

But soon the smile disappeared from her face, and she looked away from him. “If you are, then I’m even more disinclined to.” “Why, then?” Lawrence asked, putting more strength into his voice, feeling that he was being made sport of.

“Because you will surely quake with fear. All, be they human or animal, look on my form and give way with awe, and treat me as special. I have tired of this treatment.”

“Are you saying I would be afraid of your true form?”

“If you would pretend to be strong, you might first hide your trembling hand!” Holo said, exasperated.

Lawrence looked down at his hands, but by the time he realized his mistake it was too late.

“Heh. You’re an honest sort,” said an amused Holo, but before Lawrence could offer an excuse, her expression darkened again and she continued, quick as an arrow. “However, just because you are honest does not mean I should show you my form. Was what you said before the truth?”

“Before?” “That if I am truly a wolf, you would not give me over to the Church.”

“Mm . . .”

Lawrence had heard that there were some demons capable of illusions, so this was not a decision he could make lightly. Holo seemed to anticipate this and spoke again.

“Well, I have a good eye for both men and beasts. You are a man who keeps his word, I can tell.”

Lawrence was still unable to find his tongue at the mischievous Holo’s words. He certainly could go back on his word. He was understanding more and more that she was toying with him, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“I’ll show you a bit, then. A full transformation is difficult. You’ll forgive me if I only do my arm,” said Holo, reaching down into the corner of the wagon bed.

For a moment Lawrence thought that it was some sort of special pose she had to assume, but he soon realized what she was doing. She was picking a grain of wheat from the sheaf in the corner of the wagon.

“What are you doing with that?” asked Lawrence without thinking.

Before he could even finish the question, Holo popped the grain of wheat in her mouth and, closing her eyes, swallowed it like a pill.

The shell of the unhusked kernel was not edible. Lawrence frowned at the thought of the bitter taste in his mouth, but that thought soon vanished at the sight that came next.

“Uh, uughh . . .” Holo groaned, clutching her left arm and falling onto the pile of furs.

Lawrence was about to say something — this could not be an act — when a strange sound reached his ears.

Sh-sh-sh-sh. It was like the sound of mice running through the forest. It continued for a few moments then ended with a muffled thud, like something treading on soft ground.

Lawrence was so surprised he could do nothing.

The next moment, Holo’s formerly slim arm had transformed into the forepaw of some huge beast and was totally unsuited to the rest of her body.

“Mm . . . whew. It really doesn’t look very good.”

The limb appeared to be so large that she would have trouble supporting it. She rested the giant leg on the pile of furs and shifted herself to accommodate it.

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