

Translator Notes

An important message to our readers:

If you like our work, **ctrl-click** on the picture of sad Holo, make her happy by donating. We hired our sole translator so money is necessary to keep this project alive.




<http://s3.excoboard.com/pitythefool/88208/892901>

There are donor perks, I would suggest registering to the site to obtain them. In order to remain low key and fly under Yen's radar, only registration instructions and a donation link have been placed on the sole public page of the forum. If you'd like more in-depth detail about donations, donation perks, the donation total, progress etc, please register.

If you have any issues registering please contact diabloswarrior1@gmail.com

~Pitythefool

P.S: AS ALWAYS PLEASE SUPPORT THE OFFICIAL RELEASE.



Merchant
meats
spicy wolf.

支倉凍砂
Isuna Hasekura

狼と香辛料

VIII 対立の町〈上〉

狼 と 香 辛 料 Ⅷ

対立の町〈上〉

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉 十

Jyuu Ayakura





"Its some kind of fate, to be likened by people."

Eve laughed at Cole's state,
as she took off her hood and showed her face
The look of surprise on Cole was something to behold.

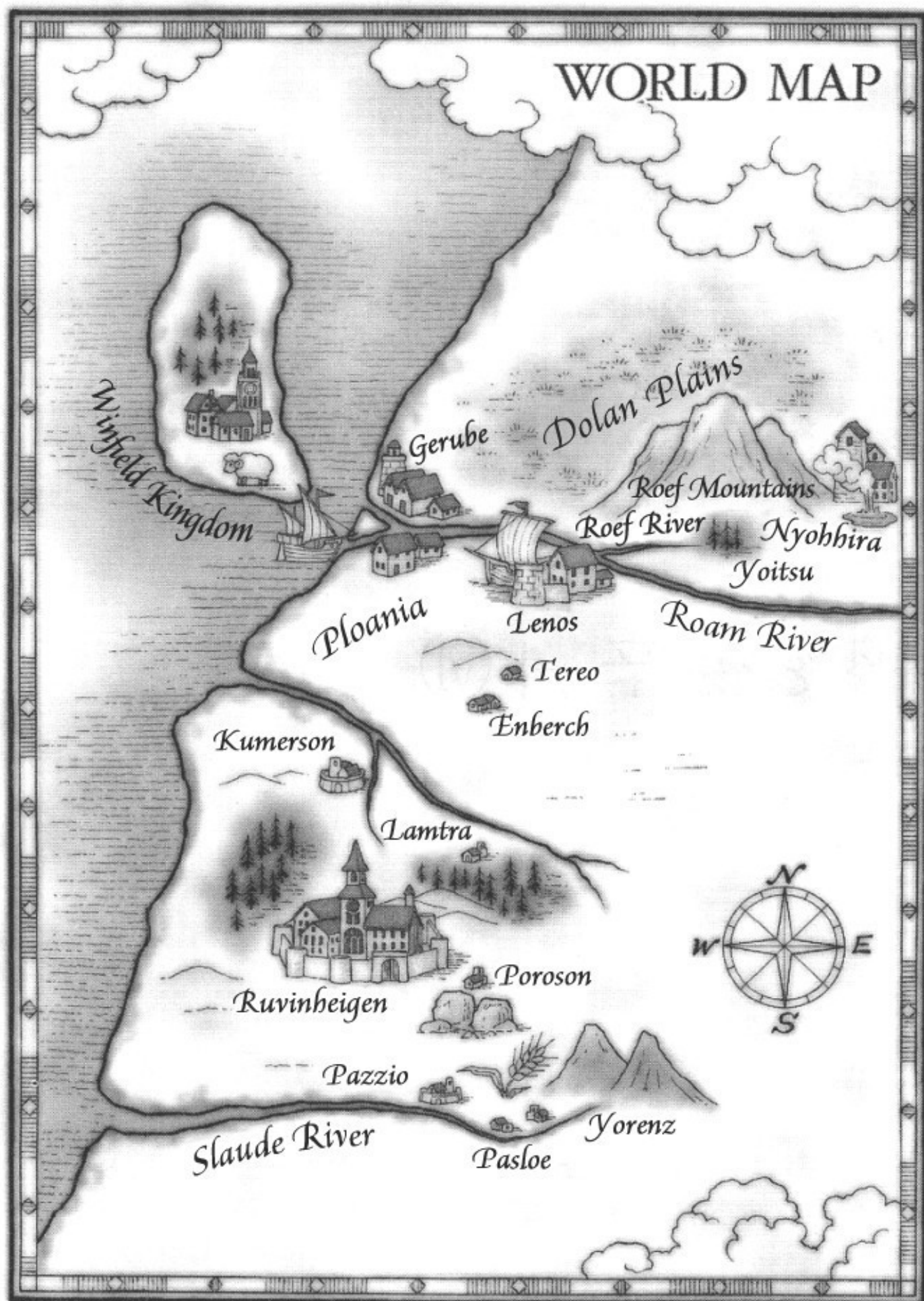


"Is that all?"

said Holo under his hand,
as she closed one eye and moved her ears happily.

*"Never had I thought that a man would bring a letter from that wolf.
What sort of weakness did you grasp about her?"*





Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 Ⅶ

対立の町〈上〉

Spice and Wolf

Volume 8

Town of Confrontation

Book 1 of 2

Translation & Editing by 'Team Pitythefool'

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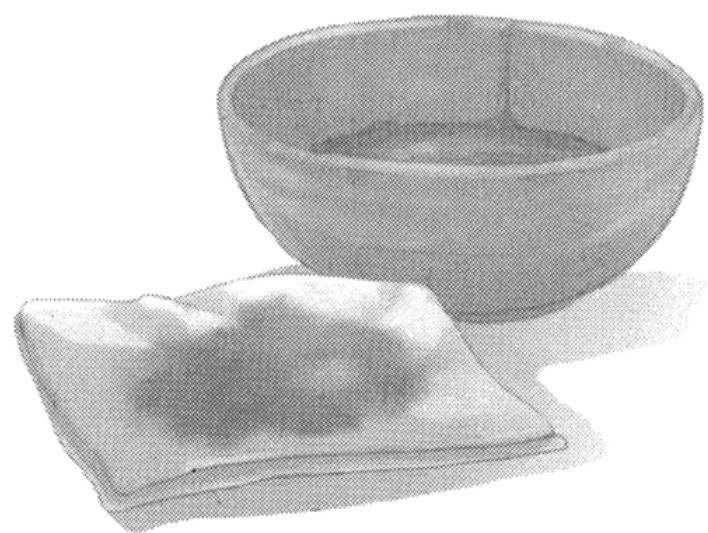
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Volume 8 Final Draft Released 3/18/12

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(272.5 inc.)

序 幕



Prologue

Note: ~~~ marks the end of a section (as opposed to the entire chapter).

The moon was hidden behind the clouds, making it pitch black. At times the cold breeze would cause their hair to flutter. The flame inside their wiry lantern danced about, making them restless in the cold and eerie deadness.

A sound of crunching ice was heard as the horse-drawn cart full of goods rolled along. No one spoke; the team was hurrying through the silence. A dim lamp swayed next to the cargo deck, illuminating the neck of the horses and the driver. It was like they were trying their hardest to look like a procession of the dead.

However, one person on the team had moved away. He bore no lamp, only a stick - it was uncertain whether it was for spurring the horses or scolding their riders. He was off on one side of the road. And he was the only one on the team whose face had any expression.. an expression of shock.

“Hello.”

Only brief utterances were exchanged, because it was too cold to have a proper conversation. It was so cold, in fact, that one could mistake a stone for a chunk of ice. Words were traded for some time on this desolate winter's night.

The other side of the conversation was an experienced merchant who faced this situation calmly, as if such a roadside meeting was normal. But the leader of this team still needed some time to accept a deal like this.

“Need a quick horse?”

The conversation had started innocently enough, and that question had been answered with a simple “no”. But after hearing the merchant's offer, no one answered. They just shook their heads in the gloom.

A breeze swept by as the horse cart inched forward in the night. The torches hanging along the entrance of this castle were bright.. so bright it felt like they were in danger of being exposed and wind up hanging as well.

Although that was actually a possibility, it was an advantageous deal that needed to be carefully considered. But normal people wouldn't have the stamina to stand in the cold and make big decisions. No matter what kind of magic was used.

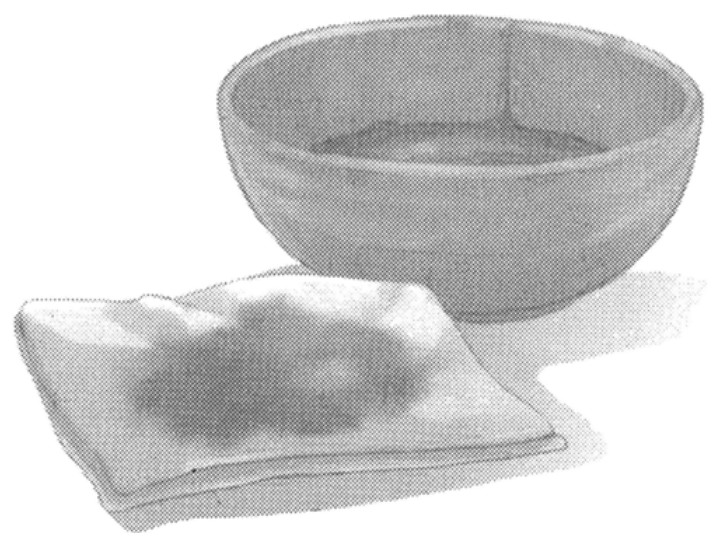
“Well, let's find a warm inn first.”

That person spoke on behalf of his team, who were so tired they could barely speak.

“Mr. Eve Boland, was it?”

That was the name of the experienced merchant he was speaking with, who assented in order to cope with the reality of the situation.

序 幕



Chapter 1

“Om nom..”

She was stuffing food into her face, swallowing barely after chewing, then opening her mouth for more. If a spoonful of porridge was sent her way, she would open her mouth to receive it without a moment's hesitation. Once in a while she would even unintentionally bite the spoon.

She wasn't young, but her teeth were still as sharp as a canine's fangs. After eating enough bread-based porridge to last for two days, this canine was finally satisfied. She had licked her lips and breathed in deeply. Now, she reclined on a bed, on two lovely woolen pillows, somewhat resembling a troubled princess.

But this princess was so thin she might be mistaken for a poor village girl. Anyone given the honor of hugging her would realize that wasn't the truth, but no one could deny that she looked the part. No.. perhaps the reason that she looked like a poor village girl was how messy her hair was after sleeping, which was uncharacteristic of princesses, or perhaps it was the pain and restlessness written on her face.

The name of this poor princess was Holo. Of course she wasn't a princess. A more appropriate title would be queen. “Queen of the white forests of the north.” Upon her head were a pair of wolf's ears, and from her waist grew a striking tail. She might appear to be a frail teenage maiden, but in reality she was a giant wolf who could swallow a man whole.

She had chosen for herself the title of Wisewolf. She lived in the wheat to control the harvest. And she had done so for several centuries. Yet in spite of deserving the prestige of royalty, those who had prayed to her would never recognize her as the god they had depended on. Of course not.. not with her undignified manner of being spoon-fed in the morning without even tidying her disheveled hair.

“Since I am defenseless against you, I take no issue with showing you my bad side.”

It was true that such a statement made him feel warm inside, but Lawrence could only reply sullenly.

“Some people only *talk* sweetly.”

He couldn't help it. This was the second time he had fed her in this childish manner, but she had yet to thank him. At least she ate the rest of her meal with more grace. Afterward, she burped and moved her ears around. Her eyes were unfocused, almost nostalgic. After noticing this, he frowned.

“How many would believe me if I told them the Wisewolf had succumbed to muscle aches, I wonder?”

He lamented while tidying the utensils. Her eyes returned to focus.

“How can you treat a frail, sickly maiden this way? Boohooohoo..”

She turned her face to the ground in admission of her failure. Yesterday, she bore Lawrence and the wandering student Cole on her back, running for half the day. She might have been a little too excited to run freely under the sun.

By the time they had arrived at an inn, she was so drained she was unable to climb the stairs. But it wasn't she who wanted to take a rest.. Lawrence and Cole were the first to surrender. In her excitement she had been more like a free and happy dog than a regal wolf.

Lawrence satirically voiced his appreciation of her speed and stamina, but as expected she simply sat up tall with a proud look on her face. A great wolf with needles of silvery hair all over her body sat on the ground with her head raised and chest puffed out. It truly suited her godly status.

But her ability to play along at such jests was enough to make him smile. For centuries she had been praised as a harvest god, so she would never truly express herself so childishly. If Lawrence didn't understand her so well he might well forget that she was a Wisewolf.

Of course, on their journey he had discovered that she was actually quite down-to-earth. And so, he also gave her a more serious compliment. But if he took his praise too far her tail might wag itself right off her body.

She had run further than expected. Her face in the morning had been so pale that Lawrence and Cole couldn't bear to see it. Lawrence's mind went totally blank. He suspected she might have fallen seriously ill. Thankfully he soon realized that she was simply very sore, and his worries were for nothing.

But he very nearly scolded her. She was now unable to move her neck and shoulders. She couldn't even stand due to the sharp pain she felt when bending her waist. She truly was every bit like a sickly maiden, even if she ate far more than a normal maiden would.

“I ran a very long distance with the two of you upon my back.”

“Yes, it was indeed exhilarating.”

Only her ears and tail moved now. She felt pain in every muscle of her body. However, there was utterly no trace of regret on her face. She enjoyed being in the form of a teenage girl, but she was ultimately still a wolf.. better suited to freely run in the wild. Lawrence finally understood just how unhappy she must have been at being unable to freely run like that while on their journey.

“And yet..”

Holo yawned as Lawrence's mind wandered.

“It *is* quite shameful that I cannot rise due to muscle ache.. but are you not even worse? You can barely move and you were merely lying on my back the entire time.”

Being unable to move her body didn't mean her venomous tongue would stay still. But those words lacked power coming from someone lying in such an unassuming pose. They may have made Cole nervous.. but lucky for the boy, he wasn't there.

“You know, if you thought things through and showed keen observation and planning skills, I'd have no problem letting you run free. I'd just follow you wherever you ran. But that's not quite what was going on last night, was it?”

Lawrence refuted. It was rare that Holo kept her mouth shut. And not only that, she bit her lip after turning away. She really did seem to realize just how shamefully she had acted.

“I couldn't just let you run, I had to hold your reins so you wouldn't lose yourself entirely. Tell me again.. who's leading whom?”

He figured this might be a good way to change things up and make her properly reflect on her actions. That's why he continued on the offensive. But he wasn't too hard on her.. she had brought them to the port town of Gerube in merely half a day with her preposterous act. A boat would have taken two full days and no horse could even compare.

It was of course because they had a goal, and were willing to risk their lives to rush. As they boated down the Roam river they learned that the bones of a wolf deity were revered in a village of the Roef mountains. They had no true evidence of this, but such bones were probably from one of Holo's kind.

The Church seemed to be searching for the bones to demonstrate their authority. This wasn't something Holo could tolerate. They simply could not ignore it. But neither Lawrence nor Holo could just openly change their plans to chase after such a rumor.

They were simply incapable of being that straightforward. Lawrence was operating under the

pretense that he wanted their travels to end on a happy note, and Holo had her own excuse as well. So they intentionally avoided being honest with each other.

According to the information they gathered, the people living along the Roam river were being led by the Church and were hunting those bones. And so Lawrence and Holo had journeyed to Gerube in order to find Eve, a merchant who knew everything about the Roam river.

Eve was of noble birth. But after her family line declined, she became a merchant. She had colluded with the Church in Lenos in committing illegal acts. She likely knew a great deal about the Church. Lawrence believed he could leverage his knowledge of this, as well as the fact that she must have sunk a boat in order to be the first merchant to sell fur at Gerube.

In order to catch her in time, they had stopped chasing her by boat and had jumped on Holo's back instead. They rushed after Eve, but had miscalculated.. she wasn't on the ship they had expected her to be on. Arold, the old owner of the inn they had stayed in at Lenos, was on board.. so clearly, it was the right vessel, and Eve should also have been aboard. But neither she nor the fur she was hauling to Gerube were aboard.

Clearly she must have continued transporting it by land. Transporting by river was a very good way to move goods quickly, but at such a short distance from Gerube other methods became viable. Perhaps she lucked out, or perhaps she planned ahead.. but if she had found horses, it wouldn't be strange for her to jump ship and use them to haul the furs the rest of the way.

It was also a sly way to avoid liability. A boat had been sunk and blocked the river, stalling other ships that were also carrying fur to Gerube. If she arrived there first, and by boat, she might as well openly declare herself the one responsible for sinking that ship. So switching to land was a keen move.

Based on this, Lawrence guessed Eve was en route to Gerube with a horse cart laden with fur. Holo wanted to press Arold for information about Eve's location, but Lawrence convinced her not to. They simply resumed their race downstream. As evening fell, Holo sighted a caravan far in the distance. Lawrence had been correct.. it was led by Eve.

They passed ahead of the caravan using a faster route, and arrived at Gerube to wait. Upon arrival, Eve looked as if she had dug herself into a grave. Her team had traveled to Gerube in the biting wind. After a brief discussion they headed to the inn that Eve had suggested. What she hadn't expected was to find Holo waiting for her there.

But even if Lawrence had that advantage, he couldn't use it. Holo was still energetic after transforming back into a human girl. She kept still, but her eyes shone with a dark light. Lawrence had anticipated they might meet this way, but he never suspected they might come to blows.

“You are too weak. Have you forgotten how you got injured?”

Holo was trying to legitimize her behavior.

“You don't think you can prove the rightness of your cause just by criticizing others, do you?”

“Grr..”

Holo pouted, staring at the ceiling. She knew she was at fault. Lawrence understood why she wouldn't want to admit it, but..

“Eve sure was clever. When pitted against you, she didn't defend.. she retreated. I'm sure you know why?”

Holo looked away. Lawrence had pulled her hand to keep her from attacking Eve. All the while, Eve had calmly observed them like a snake. No threats, not ignoring them.. just smiling.

“She knows that nothing good will come of fighting.”

“Do you see me as some child who understands nothing of profit and loss?”

After her simple refutation, Holo shut her mouth. Surely there were many complaints within her, wanting to be given a voice. Her face gradually became twisted. Lawrence stared at her, not knowing what to do. He could tell by her ears how angry she was. And so, for her sake he had to find a good rationalization for her outburst.

“All *Eve* could see was your anger getting the better of you, like a child losing their temper. As though you were acting without care for profit or loss.”

Eve realized that she had crossed a line she should never have crossed. But if her opponent could be driven to anger, she could oppose them with calm reason. After all, if one was emotional, they wouldn't be rational. In a way, they were admitting failure.

And so, no matter how angry Holo was, she could achieve nothing. But her heart was far too full of anger. Rationally, she knew she would have to forgive Eve, but emotionally it was impossible. She was bound by a curse that only Lawrence could lift.. truly a troubled princess.

“But, after such an outburst, the ensuing conversation would be less tense. It would become easier to win a profitable outcome.”

“Then?”

Holo shot him a stare. He shrugged, and softly sighed. If it *had* to be said..

“Obviously, you got angry for my sake.. and for that I am very grateful.”

Contracts were written with diplomatic language. It seemed such diplomacy wasn't only useful in business. He was embarrassed to have to spell it out for her, but Holo was being demanding. He had no choice.. when trading, one had to satisfy both parties.

“Oh? Well, if you say so.”

Her face finally calmed and became happy, her ears flicking up as if excited. The sounds of the marketplace gradually started to seep in through the window. The sun warmed the street, giving people the illusion that spring had already arrived.

Lawrence smiled to cover up the awkwardness of the moment. Holo followed suit. Things were finally calm and relaxed – such a well-earned moment should be cherished.

“Alright, I'd best tidy things up.”

“Carry on.”

Holo replied, though Lawrence was really just talking to himself. She looked down at her tail and began to tidy *it* up. It was a scenario that commonly played out on their journey, but this time there was a crucial difference. They finally remembered that difference when they heard it knocking on their door.

The door opened and there stood Cole, holding a wooden bowl. Just as Lawrence wondered what it was, he detected a strong scent.. it was indescribable. The best he could describe it as was a mixture of sulfur and burned spices. Lawrence wanted to flee from the odor, but Cole didn't seem to mind it.

“I have ointment!”

He happily waltzed into the room, clearly out of breath from running back. Holo liked the boy and took care of him, so the two of them were already quite close. Earlier in the morning he had run off to the market like a rabbit after seeing Holo's condition.

Northerners knew much about herbs. They had recipes to deal with a number of health issues, anything from wounds to fever. The ointment Cole had brought was presumably effective against muscle aches.

But it *stank*. Lawrence gasped – how would Holo react? He spun around to check and saw the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, known for her keen sense of smell, holding her tail with a pitiful look on her face. He sympathized, but what could they do? Refusing Cole's kindness was simply too cruel, so Lawrence acted as if he didn't notice Holo's pleading eyes as Cole walked up to her.

“Ah, this will also be effective for Mr. Lawrence's wound.”

Hearing that, Holo happily buried her face in the pillow and flicked her ears.

~~~

The greenish ointment was sticky and vile. Lawrence spread it on a piece of cloth and applied it to the wound on his face.

In that instant, the scent pricked his nose like needles and his face grew hot. His eyes watered in pain, and his nose felt like it would twist itself inside-out from the stench. But Cole must have spent his own meager earnings on this, so Lawrence forced himself to endure it.

But the smell was truly horrific. As he prepared to apply the ointment to Holo's shoulders and waist, the look in her eyes was one of genuine terror. Given her nose, she too must be suffering. But if Lawrence was going to suffer this seemingly-useful treatment, then she too would have to endure.

She made little squealing noises as he treated her.. it was a terrible experience. He wondered if he should buy her new clothes to make up for it.. no, maybe wine would be better? He dreaded the icy glares she would send his way afterward.

“Oh, by the way, when I was returning I saw that merchant we met last night. She wants to meet with you, Mr. Lawrence.”

After applying another layer of the ointment to the parts of Holo's body that were in the most pain, Lawrence cleaned his hands. The ointment was undoubtedly potent, so it really should be effective. But given Holo's yells, it was far too pungent. Lawrence looked over her before replying to Cole.



“You mean Eve, right?”

“Yes.”

“I guess that's what they mean when they say 'a good soldier is an efficient one'.. she's right to be up so early, she can't afford to stay here too long.”

Eve was from a fallen line of nobles, but had bounced back to become a top-tier merchant. In Lenos, the town of fur and lumber, she had trapped Lawrence in order to take part in a trade war involving fur. She had even gone as far as sinking a ship to block her rivals heading down the river.

With her wisdom, cunning, and courage, she should be fine. But dallying in this town was a huge risk; she might end up losing the war. As such she had to leave as soon as possible, taking her furs to the next town. Though the townspeople were waking up, it was too late for Eve.

“Did she tell you where I ought to go to find her?”

“Um.. she said she would wait for you downstairs.”

“I see..”

She had much to do, so she must have another reason to return. What immediately came to mind was that she hoped Lawrence wouldn't reveal the truth about the sunken ship.

“Alright. Have you had breakfast?”

“Huh? Um, yes.”

Lawrence wasn't quite as sharp as Holo, but being a merchant it was easy enough for him to detect such a lie. He poked Cole in the forehead and handed him a sack containing bread.

The boy had an interesting reason to attend school and learn Church Law. He wished to use the Churches' own laws to defend non-Church villages against them. His mannerisms, however, were more like one of their flock than one of their opponents.

He took the bag with a puzzled look on his face, but Lawrence pretended not to notice and turned back to Holo. He told her he would be heading out, and Holo's ears moved as if to reply. He had expected her to faint after smelling the ointment, but apparently she hadn't.

Lawrence was growing accustomed to the smell. The warmth he felt on his face told him that the ointment was working.. perhaps Holo, being a Wisewolf, could feel it even more keenly. As



he rose from her bed, she uttered a few words.

“If you lose, I shan't help.”

His thoughts had been right on the money. He turned to face Cole, who had taken out two small loaves of bread. There were some loaves with walnuts in the sack, but he had only taken the plain ones. Lawrence truly hoped that Holo would learn from his humble example.

“Wanna come with me?”

He was asking if Cole would like to join him to meet with Eve. After hesitating for a while, the boy nodded.

What Lawrence sought was the bony forepaw of a wolf deity like Holo. It had apparently belonged to the god of a village near Cole's hometown. Since Cole wanted to know if it was real, he had asked Holo and Lawrence to take him with them.

Because of this, Cole would probably want to hear what Eve had to say. But Lawrence felt that Cole would shrink away and not come along if he didn't ask the boy directly. He was just a kid, but he seemed to have a lot of worries. Perhaps his bond with Holo was formed because she had an air about her that cleared one's mind of worldly concerns.

“Then eat quickly.”

Lawrence was about to leave, so Cole stuffed the bread into his mouth.

“Yesh.. yesh..”

Seeing this, Lawrence continued.

“And I expect to see a look of satisfaction on that face afterward.”

The boy might seem to have the manners of a well-educated student, but he ate as if he was wild. Perhaps it was a consequence of the harsh journey he had undertaken. Right now, his face was swollen like a hamster's. He seemed to grasp Lawrence's meaning and swallowed the bread with a smile before replying.

“The Church taught us to keep our mouths closed while eating.”

“Indeed, that's a good way to hide how well they're really eating.”

Lawrence closed the door behind them after they stepped out. Cole following him like a faithful

apprentice.

“The bread was delicious.”

He smiled sweetly as he said this.. quite a clever kid.

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The inn's ground floor was a restaurant. Breakfast was a luxury that only travelers would partake in. As such, everyone at a table right now was well-dressed and ready for travel. Eve was still wearing the same traveling clothes she wore at night, so she fit in with the rest of them. But what made Lawrence feel self-conscious was even with the scarf over her face, Eve was still pinching her nose.

“What a stench!”

The innkeeper glared disapprovingly at Lawrence. Other guests seemed too surprised to be angry.. they just stared at Lawrence. He had grown accustomed to the smell, and Cole clearly didn't mind from the start. For travelers from so many places, who had smelled many scents, to react this way proved how malodorous it really was.

Lawrence sat on the chair opposite of Eve. What she then said surprised him.

“Well well.. it has been a long time since I smelled *that*. You should recover by nightfall.”

The ointment-treated side of face of his face had been struck by the hilt of a cleaver, by none other than Eve herself. Now she was having fun at his expense.

“This bright kid got it for me.”

Lawrence pointed at Cole while saying so in an exaggerated tone.

“What? From Roef?”

Eve looked at Cole and then closed her eyes. Lawrence wasn't sure what she was thinking.

“I know the lay of the land from here to Roef. That must be why you chased me down. I have no idea how you did it, but you're damn fast.”

She then squinted. One of the quirks of merchants was their ability to let bygones be bygones as soon as profit became a possibility.. even if they had just fought for their lives. Once a deal was formed, emotional baggage was discarded. Despite their struggle at Lenos, Lawrence and

Eve were speaking like old friends.

“Last night, I saw something surprising that I don't see very often. I thought I'd lapsed in my judgment when I'd entered into our contract.”

Lawrence was often befuddled by Holo's train of thought.. she was always changing topics. But he had an understanding of Eve's ways. There was a feeling in their heart akin to love. Merchants were always excited to get to know each other.

“Indeed, what I want is your knowledge.. since there *is* no contract between us.”

He was pointing out that his target wasn't Eve's fur. She nodded and rose from her chair.

“Let's change venues.. you'll be despised by the guests and innkeeper if we stay here.”

She seemed to enjoy making sport of him. But this really wasn't a joking matter, so Lawrence and Cole followed her.

“So.. how's your companion?”

Outside the inn was a narrow road.. well, it was more appropriate to call it a wide alley. Gerube was separated by the river into a north and south district. Lawrence's inn was in the north, along with a few rather lovely buildings.

By comparison the market by the river was crowded, but the alleys and shanties around that market seemed destitute. It might be that the government had loose policies, or might even be powerless, given how varied the heights of the buildings were.

Seeing the town's state it was more likely they were powerless. He considered this as they followed Eve's march away from the market.

“My companion was tired by our trip, and has ointment all over her body. As such she's resting in bed.”

“Well..”

Eve turned to look at Cole. Lawrence caught sight of a smile under her scarf.

“She should recover quite soon.”

Lawrence could tell that she meant to add, “unfortunately for the rest of us.” But Cole didn't seem to catch it, and proudly smiled.

“Well, then I'm lucky she's out of commission.. actually, *you're* probably the lucky one.”

“I agree.”

Lawrence shrugged his shoulders as he responded. He had no chance to talk with Eve last night – Holo was simply too angry.

“In any case, one who gets angry for your sake is precious. You should treasure her.”

“She's only angry because her property was damaged.. it's not really for my sake.”

It was Eve's turn to shrug.

A woman hauling a basket of winter vegetables on her back passed by them. Their darker leaves, compared to those on summer vegetables, made them feel colder in a way. They might not be suitable for pickling or being eaten raw, but they should be delicious in a soup.

“If you were indeed her property, then she would be within her rights to demand compensation.. but in that moment all that was in her mind was vengeance.”

Eve's light blue eyes were tinged with loneliness.

She had been purchased by a merchant in order to buy himself into her family, for their name. What would that man, who bought mastery over her, demand for compensation if she had been hurt?

Just thinking this made Lawrence feel as though he had wounded Eve. He regretted speaking so carelessly moments ago.

“Oh ho.. by making you feel guilty and sympathetic, this discussion should tilt in my favor.”

Eve snapped him back to reality. Tears and seduction were invaluable tools for trade. No matter how careful one was, they would still fall into such traps. Lawrence scratched his head while smiling. Of course he did so for a reason.

“But then why would you openly tell me so?”

He asked her with a mischievous tone while looking at Cole, who seemed to be thinking hard.

“I'm willing to expose my traps so you'll not be suspicious of me.”

“Right.. so that I'll fall into a more dangerous trap..”

If Eve removed her scarf there would surely be a malicious smirk underneath. Lawrence could see why Holo would call her a fox.. such a merchant was too wolf-like for the Wisewolf to want to admit any similarities between them.

“We're here.”

“Where's here?”

Lawrence stopped and Cole ran into his back. He was probably obsessing over what the lessons he had just been taught. Lawrence was reminded of doing the same thing when he was an apprentice.. it made him feel closer to the boy.

“*Here* is my base of operations in Gerube. My office-without-a-sign. You *do* understand, don't you?”

Compared with the other buildings, this one had black blotches on it's walls and a roof that looked ready to collapse. In fact, only it's stone base seemed solid. Cole swallowed, obviously nervous about Eve's joke. Lawrence could tell from the marks on it's walls that it was destined for demolition.. this was just some office that had been closed.

“Don't joke around with him.”

Lawrence voiced his disapproval as Eve pushed open a door, and Cole uttered a surprised “ah..” It seemed the boy finally realized he was being too slow. Eve turned back, but not to see the look on Cole's face.

“Because he's your beloved apprentice?”

“Alas, no. He is not my apprentice, he isn't even a merchant. I just don't want him to grow up to be an awkward person.”

Eve laughed her usual hearty laugh in response.

“Ha, ha, ha! You're right! We merchants truly are awkward.”

The two awkward merchants paid no attention to the pouting boy, and walked into the building. Lawrence then turned around, at which point Cole angrily followed them inside. Lawrence smiled and sighed. If Cole became a merchant, it might rob him of his uncommonly honest nature.

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Eve served them a drink made of a mixture of goat milk butter and mead – though Cole's had honey instead of mead. Lawrence had a craving for his usual bitter rye bread; the butter was just that rich.

“Arold's still on his way, right?”

Lawrence had been hit by the silence as they entered the living room. The only noises were the crackling charcoal flame of the fireplace and the bubbling of the boiling goat's milk. If anyone else was in the building they were being silent as a mouse.

“He should be here by evening.. want some?”

Eve offered a slice of wheat bread with the skin skimmed off the boiling goat's milk. If they added some pickled herring, it would surely be delicious.

“After eating this, our traveling food will seem poor.”

“True.. but eating good food would only be more expensive. And that's what we merchants care about, am I right?”

Eve said that intentionally to get Cole's attention. He looked up at her in surprise, then turned to Lawrence with a puzzled expression.

“Some people were just made to be loved.”

Eve smiled as she watched Cole's face. She then removed her scarf and revealed her own face to him.

“It seems there might be some motherly traits deep down inside me somewhere.”

She smiled and laughed at herself. She was a bit depressing, but she was quite a beauty. Lawrence always felt that women were better-suited to be merchants. Just flaunting her feminine side would surprise others and leave men at a loss on how to compete.

“So, what is it you want from me?”

Cole was nibbling at the bread, not stuffing it down his face as he had with his breakfast. Gazing at him, Eve got down to business.

“Something I should never ask.”

“You mean about that company along the Roam river that's looking for holy relics of pagan gods? Or do they even call them holy.. anyway, that's what you wanted to ask, isn't it?”

Lawrence nodded. Eve seemed puzzled. She took another sip of goat's milk.

“The rumor seems legitimate. After someone spread it around the Roam river, a lot of people involved in illegal trades grew interested.”

“And the truth is?”

A child's cry was heard off in the distance.. the sound of children crying was more common than hearing birds chirp.

“Nothing interesting. They didn't find anything. The rumor died off as quickly as it spread, like a bargaining chip on a table.”

Eve didn't seem to be lying, nor did she have any reason to. But there are no waves without wind..

“The rumor began in a company in Lisco village along Roef, a stream of those mountains. Is that correct?”

That company was the one that traded copper coins with D'Jean Company in Gerube.. a strange set of trades where the number of coins received wasn't the same as the number of coins sent. Lawrence was still unclear as to why.. Cole seemed to notice this as he happily continued to eat. But Lawrence wasn't in a rush to figure that out, so he kept quiet. He'd be unsatisfied if he didn't work it out for himself.

“Yes. The Diva Company. Remember that name! They own the mining rights to the hills around Lisco. This is a fantastic era for them.”

“Are D'Jean's their main trading partner here?”

“Hmm.. I wonder how you know that? It seems like you've wasted a lot of time investigating this.”

Eve dunked her bread into the goat's milk and took a big bite. As he watched her, Lawrence felt it would have been alright if he brought Holo along with him. With such tasty food, Holo would surely be placated.

“The Diva Company in Lisco, the Lenos Church we got messed up with over the furs, and D'Jean



Company here in Gerube.. they're the group that manages the flow of copper goods. But the Church were just middlemen collecting taxes from two companies who weren't on friendly terms.. and both of those companies should benefit."

"Why?"

Eve smiled mischievously at his absent-minded question.

"Sorry.. I don't mean anything malicious."

She closed her eyes and put a finger against her lips, as if to apologize for smiling. She then opened one eye and turned it on Lawrence.

"But as I recall, you're quite the wary merchant.. why would you put so much stock in this joke of a rumor?"

Merchants usually knew the answer before they asked a question. Eve calmly and happily smiled.

"As you've seen, my partner's from the north."

As he answered, Eve's face seemed to be saying "I see." She looked down into her cup.

"So you're being irrational for the sake of that lovely companion of yours."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

He didn't want to admit it, but he also wasn't going to end the conversation. Eve's eyes betrayed a genuine smile. She didn't press the issue.

"Right, and the god's paw that people worshiped was involved in a transaction that isn't tolerable. Regardless, I've another question for you."

Her pose hadn't changed, but now her eyes were directed at Lawrence rather than the cup. Such a happy stare from a merchant meant they had found a weakness in their opponent, something they could leverage to extort a lower price.

"You're a merchant who exchanges goods and money.. does that make you a friend or enemy of your companion? To be blunt, do you represent good.. or evil?"

Cole inched back in surprise. It was true that Lawrence's motivation was profit. And as a merchant he was used to solving all problems with money. That was no different from those

who wanted to buy and use the relic, the bones of a god.

All merchants were the same. Their money was their skeleton key. If the rumor was real, once Lawrence learned where the bones were he would use a merchant's tactics to acquire them.

How would that appear to Cole and Holo? Without a doubt, Lawrence planned to use his merchant skills.. would that make him their friend or foe? Was purchasing the bones right or wrong?

He licked the milk off his lips before answering.

“Buying goods is in itself not an evil act. But using money to buy anything but goods could be.”

“Meaning?”

“If I bought the bones for power or prestige, or to buy my companion's happiness, she may look down on me with contempt. Money is just a tool to purchase *things*. It's evil to use it otherwise. It would be like a woodsman using an ax not to cut wood, but people. I'm sure my partner will understand.”

Eve squinted, her smile spreading. Merchants used money to solve problems; they were always being challenged to consider the morality of their behavior. But credibility was the most important thing to a merchant. Their answers to such challenges determined their quality, their morality.

A merchant's credibility was the mass placed on the scales to judge their quality. Lawrence wasn't sure if this was what Eve was implying, but he knew she was trying to judge him by the quality of his answer.. so that was probably it.

Eve listened to his answer with a dark smile. Her face then returned to it's default expression and she raised her cup.

“Sorry.. I *do* want to trade with you.. I shouldn't be asking such strange questions.”

The corner of Lawrence's left lip rose, and he raised his own cup to meet hers. He didn't actually clink his cup with hers, since that might blemish good silverware; it was a way to show one's opponent they were a match for them.

“I told you that I envied you and your companion.. I've never felt that more strongly than I do right now.”

Eve smiled and shrugged. She then diverted her gaze to Cole, with her usual merchant-like

demeanor.

“Well, it seems true that you're not the apprentice of Kraft Lawrence. Personally, I genuinely find that a pity.”

Cole's eyes became round upon hearing that, before looking at the ground. He seemed not to know what to do. Lawrence smiled; in his heart he agreed that it was a shame.

Cole surely must feel divided because he knew he couldn't accept Eve's implied suggestion. Eve seemed to understand this as well.. she smiled and closed her eyes. When they opened again they were looking at Lawrence.

“I suspect you know that Diva's search for these bones isn't something that'll just cost you a hundred Lumione. If you recklessly interfere you'll realize how cheap our lives really are. That said, I trust my judgment as a merchant.. and I'm willing to extend that trust to you.”

After turning the cup in his hands slowly, Lawrence took another sip. If he didn't exaggerate things here, Holo would be angry with him.

“I chose life over money.. but my companion is worth more to me than my life. And.. I'm also quite looking forward to this.”

He echoed the words he'd spoken when he and Eve had their past confrontation over the value of a life. She smiled.. it was the kind of smile Holo would have worn in her wolf form.

“Once in a while, a good treasure hunt can be fun. So alright.. you want to learn about D'Jean's links with Diva? Then I'll write you a letter of introduction for D'Jean Company. After that..”

She closed an eye and tilted her head.. it was a pose that screamed confidence.

“It's up to you.”

Her charm was undeniable. Holo would surely be upset if she heard that, but Eve's expression and pose were dazzling. She was a real merchant.. talented, knowing what to say, and how to say it with the right gestures. He lowered his head in praise. Merchants on the golden path sure were inspiring..

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Eve sliced off a piece of expensive parchment with a knife, wrote on it, and sprinkled some sand on it to dry the ink. While she waited for it to dry she readied a horse-hair string and a bit of red wax. After counting enough time for the ink to dry, she rolled up the parchment, sealed it with

the wax, and tied it up with the string. Her hand-written letter was ready.

It might appear rather ordinary, but such letters represented pure profit to a merchant. Lawrence suspected that Eve spoke the truth about wanting to trade with him.

“Barring any accidents, I'll be leaving town tomorrow afternoon. I'll travel south by sea, leaving this cold region behind.”

“Then let's have a farewell celebration so I can express my gratitude. This'll be the last chance I have to see you before you strike it big as a merchant.”

Lawrence received her letter, and Eve smiled and nodded.

“I must rest up today before I depart. But if you return at night I can ask a servant to prepare dinner for us.”

“How about tomorrow at dawn?”

Eve's smile was probably one of the same surprise most people would show with their entire face. She sat like that for a moment before crossing her arms and sighing.

“But I'll be alone at dawn.. well, I suppose that will give me a chance to prove my abilities.”

Back in Lenos, Eve had joked with Lawrence about her how confident she was in her appeal.. maybe it wasn't a joke after all. She spoke so gently that it matched her noble lineage. Her hoarse voice only amplified that effect. Cole's jaw dropped as he stared at her. If she wore the right clothes, she would seem every bit a baroness.

“It seems it's not just pork and beef on the menu tonight.. I'd best be careful.”

“Oh ho.. if your companion is in a good mood, bring her along.”

“Certainly. I thank you for the letter.”

Eve waved, then closed the door gently behind them. Merchants didn't wave their hands in farewell, but Eve clearly waved at Cole. Lawrence carefully put her letter in the pocket inside his coat, then took a peek behind himself. As suspected, Cole was staring at the door.

“She's quite the interesting one, isn't she?”

Lawrence stepped away. Cole snapped out of it and followed suit.

“Ah.. um.. yes.”

“She's the one who gave me this wound.”

Lawrence pointed to his ointment-treated cheek, but Cole didn't seem to understand at first. A moment later he spun around to look at the door again, a look of disbelief on his face.

“There was a dispute, and it was resolved with the handle of a cleaver.”

“I see.. ”

“Though she's surprisingly personable, it's not good to be careless. Just like there's a pretty face under her scarf, there are other terrible layers under that.”

Cole frowned, not quite sure what Lawrence was working at.

“Now you know why Holo was so wrathful last night.. because Eve nearly killed us.”

“Ah!”

Cole shouted out, not being able to imagine that someone so pleasant could be the bravery and cruelty of a thief. Lawrence wanted to tell him that humans were creatures of many faces and hidden weapons, to make him aware of the real world, but he spied a serious look on the boy's face. He was so honest he might oppose the attitude to suspecting others. But when he raised his head, his face was full of puzzlement.

“What is it?”

Cole was always like this. No matter how brilliant one was, they could never be a merchant if they couldn't control their facial expressions. But Cole would be a wonderful member of the clergy, so that was alright.

“If we want to survive, we have to behave like that, don't we?”

His voice was tinged with remorse.. like a young knight stepping out onto the battlefield, all the while chastising himself for not working hard enough. Lawrence didn't quite grasp what he was talking about.

How did their nearly being killed by Eve relate to living in the world? Did he mean he had to learn how to survive facing a situation like that where he might be killed? Lawrence wasn't sure, but Cole continued speaking.. so he waited patiently.

“Of course I'll never accept the principles of the Church.. and this sort of thing happened even in my village.. I know we must learn to think in different ways.. but even though it's not my place to say this, reality sure is harsh..”

Cole walked with his eyes glued to the ground in front of him. He just kept talking. Lawrence, on the other hand, stared up at the sky as he walked. He had no idea what Cole was going on about.

“Well-”

Lawrence interjected, and Cole quickly raised his head.

“No, no! I did not mean that you were wrong, Mr. Lawrence.”

The look of fear in his eyes made Lawrence's own eyes open widely in surprise.

“I.. I just don't understand what you're saying. I can't figure it out..”

As Lawrence said that, Cole looked at the ground again, his look of fear replaced by one of embarrassment. Lawrence scratched his head. He was completely stumped. He really didn't get it. But it looked like Cole wanted to change topics, so Lawrence did.

“In any case, let's go back to the inn before we go to D'Jean Company.”

Cole nodded in silence.

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“And that's basically what happened.”

Holo had told them that the ointment was just too pungent to stand if she didn't cover herself. Right now, only her head was outside of her blanket.

“Truly?”

“You would know if I was lying, right?”

Just as Lawrence stepped into the room, she had awakened. She then sat up tall to look at them. It struck Lawrence as strange, until he realized it was because she was able to move. In the morning she wouldn't have even sat up, but now it looked like the pain had subsided to the point where she could bear it.

“It really *is* good medicine..”

Lawrence decided that he ought to take her with them to D'Jean Company. But that smell had to stay behind.. so the ointment would unfortunately have to be washed away. He asked Cole to go prepare some hot water for them.

“I cannot fault you for not understanding Cole.. it would be like discussing fish with a butcher.. entirely out of your element.”

Holo leaned on her pillow while yawning. She would only speak this way to provoke him.. was she making sport of him again? He sighed in surrender, knowing better than to antagonize her.

“I'm aware of how slow my mind is.. but I can't just will it to be faster. In the end I still won't understand.”

He had raised the white flag.. but there were tears on the edges of Holo's eyes and she looked quite upset.

“What's wrong?”

Holo smiled at his question.

“Um.. it seems I was too easy on you..”

One of her ears twitched.

“What do you mean?”

“I just cannot bring myself to be hard on you if you are going to act so meekly.”

“..”

What was Holo expecting? He put his hand to his forehead, which was apparently a satisfying-enough reaction for her. She finally smiled her normal mischievous smile.

“Indeed, you are aware of the truth, so it is difficult for you to see it any other way. Do you really not understand how others would view the relationship between you and that fox?”

She spoke while smiling.. which meant she had given him all the hints he needed. Lawrence would have to try to think from her perspective to figure it out. It was the type of challenge a merchant couldn't refuse.. she was testing him once more. He tried to think like Cole, about what had taken place between him and Eve.

He had been injured by the handle of a cleaver.. nearly killed. Holo had lost her temper. After hearing that, Cole's expression had twisted, his face red in embarrassment..

“Ah.”

Lawrence figured it out. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, much like beer, though it also made him want to laugh.

“Oh, ho. Lucky you.”

Holo grinned happily. She knew Cole's take on the situation was impossible. Lawrence raised his palm to his forehead and sighed. It was too easy to be misunderstood.. no, it was actually kind of hard to accept that someone like him would be misunderstood this way. All he could do was smile.

“Then he thought I'd cheated on Eve, and she retaliated violently? I never would have guessed.. so *that's* why he told me he didn't think I was wrong..”

Lawrence actually had half a mind to joke and say “so he thought I cheated on *you*,” but joking with Holo that way might be life-threatening.

“Both that fox and I are females.. you are a male. For me to fight that fox, there would only be one reason. What I don't understand is why your kind fights over shiny pieces of gold. I could be bought for sixty coins, was it? Ah, me, I simply cannot comprehend you humans.”

Hearing her annoyed tone made Lawrence think back to all the things he had done for Holo that required money. He was depressed that she didn't realize he would fight for money partly for her sake, but she was the Wisewolf of Yoitsu.. she seemed to notice his reaction.

“But your behavior was oddest of all, coming back for me like that.. I just cannot understand how your mind works.”

She set her face down on the pillow, but still kept her eyes on him. There was no way he could get angry or turn away from her, not when she was being so supportive. So he just shrugged his shoulders and caved in, brushing his hand across her face.

“Is that it?”

She whispered, squinting her eyes and rolling her ears happily. Lawrence could hardly believe it, and so he prepared himself for the worst. He looked around to make sure no one was watching them and took a deep breath. Then he moved his face closer to hers, as he had done in Lenos.

But unlike that time, just as their faces nearly came into contact, there came the sound of knocking at the door, snapping him back to reality.

“I have the hot water!”

Cole's voice rang out as he pushed the door open with his back. He entered the room carrying a large bucket. It was not a light one, and for Lawrence's sake he had carried it upstairs on his own. There was no way he could be faulted or punished. Lawrence stood up beside the bed and forced himself to reply.

“Thank you.”

A cold sweat had broken out on his back. Just as the door was knocked, Holo had revealed an evil smile.. she had been turning her ears toward the sound of Cole's footsteps.

“What happened?”

Lawrence could act tough, but it wouldn't change the atmosphere in the room. Cole was already confused. But Lawrence still acted tough, knowing that Holo would be grinning behind his back. After all, she had set this trap to see him panicky and flustered. But that wasn't the most upsetting thing for Lawrence. He touched his face, pretending to scratch it.

“The water may be too hot.. if it is, I'll bring some cold water.”

Cole set down the bucket and immersed two towels. If such a clever kid could be his apprentice, Lawrence felt his travels would be a lot easier.

“Yes, thank you.”

“There is nothing to thank.. I asked you to bring the water, so that's the least I can do.”

Cole's guileless smile was the kind that would inspire people to buy him seconds at dinner. If Holo had such a powerful smile, Lawrence was sure he would be bankrupt within a month.

“Then I shall wash myself. The ointment was good for my body, but terrible for my nose.”

Holo spoke while hopping off the bed, leaving Cole a bit flustered.. he had never considered that the ointment would have that problem.

“Hmm.. the water is just right. We should wash up before it gets cold.”

As Holo stirred the water, a cloud of steam spread upward. It was probably because of how cold



the room was and not due to the water being terribly hot.

“Good. Just don't catch a cold.”

As he spoke, Holo wrung out a drenched towel and threw it to him. It was hot, but he held it while he pondered whether he should remove the ointment as Holo suggested. He wanted to move the towel to his face, but felt a little uncomfortable.. Cole was standing there, with a sad look on his face. Lawrence was unable to ask him to leave, but Cole caught on and spoke first.

“Ah.. I'll leave for a while.”

He then smiled thinly.. something was on his mind. As he walked to the door, he glanced back wordlessly, a serious look on his face like a messenger swearing he wouldn't reveal an important secret. Lawrence understood, and turned to Holo as the door closed. She was strenuously wringing out her towel.

“From the look on his face, your talk with the fox must have been quite pleasant.”

That's why Cole was so serious. To him, Lawrence had argued with Eve because she was jealous. That meant the two of them were close. But Lawrence knew he shouldn't take it so seriously, or he'd be teased.

“The look on his face was saying 'I'll keep your secret, Mr. Lawrence.'”

Holo raised her head in laughter.

“Hohoho.. and he looked at me so apologetically..”

She then sat on the floor and bent her knees, supporting her chin upon them.

“If you were more like him you would be far more lovable.”

Lawrence took his time to respond. He pulled the bandage off his right cheek and felt his wound. It wasn't very swollen, and no longer hurt. The ointment was definitely effective.. perhaps effective enough to earn him some profit.

“Well, those who live near a copper mine will become tinted red, and I'm less lovable because I'm always around *you*.”

Lawrence fired his shot before rubbing his face. The towel's warmth was very comforting. Holo mimicked him, but rubbed her neck instead of her face. Her ears flicked up and down, and the towel was so discolored by the ointment that she seemed surprised.

“Well, the copper analogy is certainly apt.. your face is *always* red around me.”

Lawrence flipped his towel around and rubbed his face again with it's clean side. It felt terrific. He then turned to Holo and replied.

“It hasn't been red recently, has it?”

“What a load of hogwash.”

From her answer it was clear that she was playing with him, but his emotions got the better of him. When he noticed the smile on her lips, he knew he was trapped once again.

“Oh, you do not agree? Then I suppose the boy's intelligence *is* rare.”

Holo tossed her towel at Lawrence, stripped off her clothes, and cast them aside. Lawrence just sat there, unable to respond. She posed with her hand on her waist as if straightening her back.

“Would you rub my back for me?”

Holo didn't mind him seeing her naked body, but Lawrence did mind. It was obvious she was messing with him yet again.. just making sport of someone who was trying to be a gentleman. He excused himself, tossing the towel back to her like a child throwing a pillow.



Cole's ointment was almost miraculous. In such a short time, Holo went from being unable to move to only feeling slight pain. It was so effective that Lawrence's face had nearly recovered.. but now Holo's face was more twisted than before.

“How is your wound?”

Lawrence went red upon hearing that question.. he was angry, and didn't want to face her. He knew he had just upset her, so he didn't counter-attack. It seemed she took it personally that he tossed the towel back at her. It wasn't an act.. she really *did* want him to rub her back, and he had misread her. It was his loss.

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“So, this company is up to no good?”

The three of them walked to the market. There should be stalls there, and Lawrence had mentally prepared himself for the inevitable blackmail to get him to buy things. But he didn't expect Holo to sniffle while they walked, and it made him feel bad. He looked at her and discovered she was actually sniffing at the clams being heated on a hot stone at a nearby stall.

“We've yet to confirm that, but according to Eve it seems very likely.”

He wasn't sure if Holo was listening anymore; her eyes were shining and wordlessly doing the asking for her. Lawrence knew it was useless to refuse. He'd best save his energy. He handed a copper coin to the shopkeeper, then sharpened small sticks and picked out enough clam meat for the three of them.

He was about to remark on how inexpensive the clam meat was, but then he was told that salt would be extra. He smiled, voiced a complaint to the shopkeeper, and got them to tell him where D'Jean Company was.. it would be a waste of money if he didn't at least get some useful information.

“Will they tell us anything once we arrive?”

Only Cole thanked Lawrence for the clam. Of course, that misunderstanding was now cleared up.

“As Eve said, that'll be up to me.”

“In that case, we should be expecting nothing.”

Cole smiled at her words. It seemed Lawrence was once again the butt of the jokes.

“But I must say.. I had not expected the difference between the north and south sides of this city to be so great..”

Holo was right. Gerube was located at the Roam river's estuary, and was divided in two by the river. Their inn was in the north, and the market and nicer buildings were clustered around the river. There were more people in those areas, but that was just an illusion when compared to the inn.

As they walked along the river they saw a stony beach. Being along the estuary of the river, the beach was rather expansive and stretched quite far from the water. To their right was the sea.. Lawrence's nose could already smell the salt in the air. On the other side of the river was the south side of town. It's entrance was the largest market in Gerube.

This delta was the most lively area in the three regions of Gerube. But the buildings in the south side were the most beautiful. In the north side of town one would feel poor. Lawrence could barely make out the ships and marketplace on the riverbank of the south side, but he suspected there would be more ships and goods there than on the north side.

It was common for towns to have a poor district and a wealthy district. Being separated by the Roam river meant that the north and south sides of town might even be operating independently of one another.

“There should be a store on the other side of the river named Ron's Company.”

“That is where your guild-mates would gather, is it not?”

“Yes, though I actually went to their other branch on the delta.”

Lawrence pointed to the small town on the delta between the river and the sea. He wasn't sure if “town” was the right word.. but merchants considered it an independent region.

From the north side, the delta seemed like little more than a mess of gray buildings. But when the wind blew from that direction, it seemed to carry with it the hustle and bustle of the area. If Holo took her cloak off there, it would surely cause a riot.

“T'would appear to be a busy place.. we shall pay it a visit, yes?”

“What, the clams weren't filling enough?”

Holo responded by pouting like a child. She surely realized that Lawrence would take them there after their work was done, so it must be an act. He shrugged to show his understanding,

but then stopped walking.. Cole was silently staring at the delta, not even eating his clams.

“What's the matter?”

Cole jumped at Lawrence's sudden question.

“Wha..? N-Nothing..”

“..nothing?”

As she pressured Cole, Holo snatched his stick of clam meat and ate one of the two pieces that remained.

“You have nothing to say?”

Lawrence had heard that beasts were rather tough on their children. It seemed to be true for wolves, at least. She and Cole were so alike; they couldn't just tell say what they wanted. He remembered the time he and Holo had just met, and the convoluted manner she used to get him to buy her some apples. She wasn't as difficult anymore, but perhaps she was saw a bit of herself in Cole.

“I just.. I..”

He was still young, but he *was* a teenager.

“I want to see it.. the delta..”

Unlike Holo, he even looked at Lawrence bravely as he replied. Lawrence grabbed Cole's stick back from Holo, and returned it to him.

“So much braver than you.”

His retort earned him a kick from Holo.

“You aren't my apprentice, and I've yet to repay your graciousness with the ointment. So relax.. just voice out your desires.”

It would normally feel strange to have to say this to someone, but not Cole. He was too humble.. perhaps it was just the way he was raised. He behaved just as Lawrence believed an apprentice should act, if he had one.

“..I understand.”

Cole answered with a smile, but it wasn't a natural one. He seemed to realize that Lawrence and Holo were worrying about him, and forced himself to answer that way.

There was a commonly-known saying that a kindly master once wanted to free an obedient and honest slave. He told the slave to live freely, and never serve anyone again. And so the slave obeyed the order and never served anyone.. but if he lived to obey it, was he truly free?

Cole must have put himself in the shoes of that slave.. his smile reflected that.

"But we can't go there just yet. Merchants are impatient, so if we don't finish our job first I won't feel at ease."

"Of course.. but.."

Cole scratched his head as he spoke.

"I'm looking forward to it."

Hopefully Holo would gain a bit of his honesty, thought Lawrence. But he didn't dare to look at her directly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her hiding her anger behind a smiling face.

"This is my third visit to this town, but I've never been to the delta."

"It costs too much to cross the river?"

Cole nodded. Lawrence wanted to ask how he had crossed the river in the first place if he didn't even have enough money to get into the delta area. But Cole always had an extreme solution.. he might have even swam across the river with his clothes tied to his head.

"Right, and I've never been to the south side.. how about you?"

They continued their exchange, since Lawrence noticed that Cole had finished his clam meat. Cole looked around before he answered, then whispered to Lawrence.

"The south side is.. beautiful.."

Despite being separated only by a river, the north and south sides were vastly different. The north was a pagan area, the south a place for merchants and the Church.. perhaps that accounted for the difference. Southern merchants tended to be wealthier, and so wealth gathered there.

“..but the people of the north were far more charitable.”

“Ah.. I've heard that the people on the north side were born in the northlands.. is that true?”

“I think so. Many people came here from Roef. But even if it's untrue, I still think the people on the north side were kinder.”

Lawrence rubbed his nose with his finger as he searched for a good reply. The north and south sides had a relationship like humans and wolves.

“A tough environment brings out the kindness in people.”

Cole smiled and nodded strenuously. His mission was to save his northern homeland by studying Church Law in the south, so of course he would be happy when his kind was appreciated. Lawrence empathized.

Lawrence also knew the reason the largest trading center was built on the delta; it was a buffer, a neutral zone, between the north and south sides.

“But still..”

Lawrence was looking at the delta as Cole continued.

“The people living in the south always seem happy.”

Cole seemed to add this as though Lawrence would be unhappy if he didn't.. Lawrence smiled in surprise.

“Well, the weather's better in the south.. it's easier to make wine.”

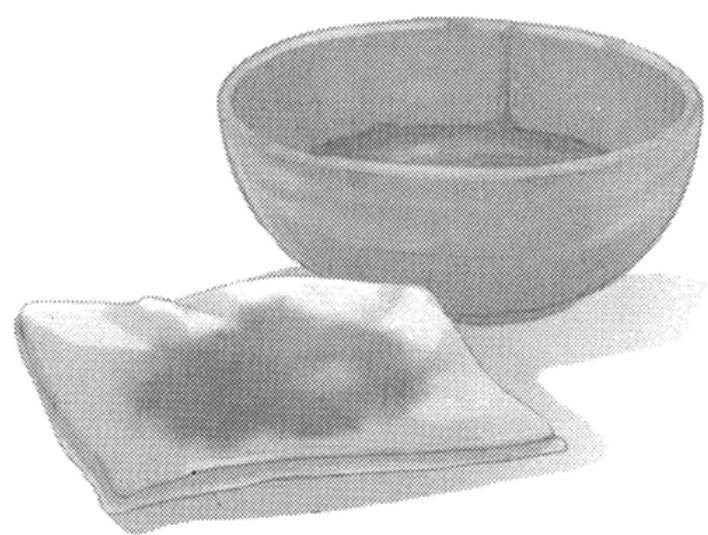
“Ah, I see..”

In a few years, Cole would surely grow into an extraordinarily gentle man. This idea popped into Lawrence's head, but he had no right to object. And Holo seemed to have the same idea. She walked with Cole, hand in hand, possibly investing for the future. It hit Lawrence as a cheap way to stoke his jealousy, and sure enough the eyes under her cloak sharply turned on him as if to say “if you yourself get too brave, I still have other options.”

He rubbed his chin and sighed, swallowing the words he wanted to say: do you feed the fish you have caught? But no matter how badly he wanted to chastise her, he knew that by saying it out loud he would lose face compared to Cole. He was just a boy, after all, there was no need to

take things too seriously. He breathed in deeply and smiled.

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Chapter 2

The Roef river joined the Roam river at the base of the mountains. In turn the Roam river joined the sea at the Winfield Channel. Lisco, a mining town, was further upstream on the Roef river, while Lenos was where the two rivers met, and Gerube lay on the shores of the channel.

Gerube's location made it the trading post for the copper crafts coming downstream from Lisco. So copper-focused companies in Gerube should probably be rather large.. at least, that's what they expected until they arrived at the door of D'Jean Company.

"This is it?"

Holo was the first to voice her disappointment. She wore of a look of concern, as if she was worried the door would crumble if she touched it. Indeed, she seemed unhappy enough to transform into her wolf form and destroy the place.

Their signpost was wrought-iron, and their loading docks on the street were full of different products, but they didn't have long-haired horses to haul goods to and from the north.. not even heated caravans. One thin mule stood outside their door, it's back laden with grass. It yawned while waiting for it's journey to begin.

Cole also thought about companies in terms of wealth and power. His face seemed both aggressive and cautious toward this poor company.

"Would you mind telling me who you are?"

In the accountant's office was a slightly overweight man, who raised his head from his writing when he saw Lawrence. He was the only one there, other than some chickens pecking at the grass on the floor.

"I welcome you if you're here to buy. But if you're here to sell, you've come to the wrong place."

He didn't even stand, though his chubby face did smile. He seemed quite tired.

Holo didn't like his attitude, and looked at Lawrence. This was D'Jean Company, who had traded the bones of the her kin for some unthinkable reason? Her emotions were confused; this was the foe she wanted to bite to death, but they hardly seemed worthy.

Cole, on the other hand, still seemed to feel his tired face had some power behind it. And, after all, the size of a company didn't correspond to how skilled it's people were. There was even the

saying that a phoenix might fly from a chicken's nest.

“Is no one else here?”

Lawrence asked while walking back out onto their loading dock. There was so much grass strewn about that one could easily mistake the building as the home of a farmer. It had the minimal requirements to be considered a storefront, but was hard to view it as such.

“Hmm.. you're a merchant from the south, are you? Must be profitable.”

There were weapons stacked in one corner; they were probably goods left behind in the store that couldn't be sold. That helped ease Lawrence's mind, since he had also suffered a great loss from the recent price crash in military equipment.

“It's not great, but it's not terrible either.”

“It's never terrible here, either.”

The man spoke with obvious sarcasm, raising his hands in surrender. Holo and Cole joined Lawrence as he looked around. Holo then suddenly picked up some grass and discovered two chicken eggs under it.

“Oh.. we've got eggs. The hens lay 'em everywhere. It's quite a bother finding 'em all, even though there are fewer chickens around this year. Last year they were everywhere.. the noise was godawful.”

“I take it this is due to the cancellation of the northern expedition?”

“Aye. No one comes now, and there's no profit to be had. Men have no reason to move if it'll just make 'em feel hungry, after all. Crop prices fell, and the buckets and bottles and weapons that were popular last year just gather dust. Only wine's popular now.”

“Oh?”

That seemed to pique Holo's curiosity. The chubby man shrugged.

“When there's naught else to do you may as well drink wine, right?”

Holo agreed.

“So, Mr. Merchant with two little ones in tow, what opportunity do you bring for me today?”

“Little ones?”

Holo was so taken aback that she pulled down her scarf. Her nun-like facade was crumbling. Lawrence nervously put on an expression begging her to calm down.

“I'd like to meet the owner of D'Jean Company.”

“You're lookin' at him.”

Lawrence expected that answer, so he just nodded without surprise. He stepped forward and set Eve's letter down in front of the man.

“Oh, I apologize for the attitude. I wasn't expecting a friend of Boland Company.”

“Company..?”

Lawrence had no idea that Eve ran her own company.. it came as a bit of a shock. But it did reinforce his feeling that she was suited for the nickname “the wolf”. The man wasn't surprised by Lawrence either, and just continued speaking in a relaxed manner.

“It's just her on her own.. there's not even a sign. But she's got her network of information and contacts everywhere, so we can consider it a powerful company, can't we?”

He opened the letter as if hoping Lawrence would agree with him. Lawrence didn't know the extent of Eve's influence, and felt he shouldn't reveal his ignorance to the man, so he just smiled and nodded. The man nodded back, though Lawrence wasn't sure what he was thinking.

“Huh.. so you're Kraft Lawrence? I can't picture anyone bringing a letter from that wolf here. Did she corner you?”

The man didn't seem too clever, but the furrows in his eyebrows betrayed his experience. His face wasn't threatening, nor did it show any dignity.. just interest in the situation. The face of a properly experienced merchant.

“I can't say.”

“Hahaha! I see.. well then what can I do for you?”

The man shifted his attention to the letter, and Lawrence noticed his face slightly contort. The letter would be about the remains of the wolf deity.. any legally-straight merchant would just laugh it off and pull out a bottle of wine. But the owner of D'Jean Company just smiled in thought. After a moment he put down the letter.

"I see.. it's been quite a long time since someone was interested in this. Well, you're not just here for fun, are you? I mean, you even turned to Eve Boland for this.."

"Please."

Lawrence answered with a smile to match the owner's smile. Two emotions mixed on the man's face, one of disbelief that someone came for the bones, and one of relief that someone wanted to hear him talk about them. Indeed, someone was here to hear their story. Lawrence felt a bit conflicted upon seeing that, but the man stopped smiling.

"Just for being on the receiving end of a joke, you were able to get that wolf to write you this letter. You must be an excellent merchant. I'm guessing these two kids aren't what they seem, either."

"We're not the directors of some company, nor do we come seeking praise. What's important to us is what you can do for us."

"Kraft Lawrence, a proper merchant visiting my company.. that's what's important to me. Right.. I'm Ted Reynolds, the owner of D'Jean Company."

That was a name Lawrence had read on the Roam river, the name of D'Jean Company's accountant. He had pictured the man to be younger than himself, but here sat a man twice his age.

"D'Jean was the name of my father's wife.. he loved her greatly."

"That's very respectable."

"Using her name came as a shock to his trading partners. They figured he was just a man cowed into obeying his wife's wishes."

He held up one finger and closed one eye, in a gesture that nobles used which annoyed others. It really didn't suit him, and ended up giving off a friendly vibe. Lawrence reminded himself to guard his speech around this man.

"It's quite odd, isn't it?"

"Yes, but only because people are odd."

"You're right.. uh.."

Reynolds stood up before continuing.

“Please wait a moment.”

He walked back into his office. The chickens behind him were clucking and pecking at Cole's sandals. Cole kept pushing them away with his feet, but they kept returning. Holo watched their battle for a moment before snarling at them. The chickens fled.

“Stay, hey!”

Cole shouted as their feathers were strewn all around. A moment later, Reynolds returned with a box. Even the dimmest merchant would realize what had happened.

“Sorry.. I don't know why the chickens here like stuff with fur.”

“It's so cold that we really should keep our toes hidden anyhow.”

Reynolds laughed out loud at Lawrence's candor.

“Hahaha.. I can't imagine what it's like. If they pecked my toes I'd cook 'em for dinner with the eggs tomorrow.”

Cole rubbed his toes while laughing. Lawrence's attention was glued to the box Reynolds had set down on the table.

“Is that it?”

“Yes, this is it.”

As the box was opened, Lawrence shivered at the sight that greeted them. Inside were animal bones.

“This is what those who wanted to help the Church found after they heard their high offer for the bones of the wolf God.”

His proud and lengthy sentence was well-suited to a merchant who was impatient to make a sale. But they didn't make it any easier to determine if he was being serious or not. But Lawrence knew all he had to do was ask Holo to know for certain..

“They're the real thing?”

“That'd be nice.. I didn't buy 'em blindly just 'cause there was profit to be had. Indeed, they're

the reason my companies' in dire straits.. soon I'll have to shut this place down.”

It would clearly be a lie that they cost enough to jeopardize his business.. he could easily corner the copper market from upstream and make a great deal of money. That being said, he didn't seem to be lying about his company being in jeopardy somehow. His eyes were betraying that he wanted to ask a childish question.

“But why would *you* be interested in such a stupid rumor?”

Lawrence had no way to change his mind if Reynolds felt it was just a stupid rumor.

“Eve also asked me that.. but you see, my two associates are from the north.”

“Ah..”

Reynolds' eyes opened wide, as if he expected to hear something less reputable from Lawrence.

“I see.. hmm.. my mistake. Don't think ill of me. I don't want your god insulted by my feelings on this ridiculous matter.”

Reynolds tapped the side of his nose, then spread his arms as if in prayer. The two northerners understood everything upon seeing this; they were near the Roef mountains, and the man wanted to show that he did respect the people of the north.

“Then I'll help you out.. this really is a ridiculous situation.”

Reynolds seemed to know how to manipulate the mood. Lawrence wondered if he was truly the owner of a company, but rather a chamber counselor of the town.

“Deep in the mountains, there's many a myth that the Church can't tolerate. A lot of the myths are hard to believe, but some aren't.. I'm not sure where you're from exactly, but I'm guessing it's that village if you know the myth of these bones.”

“Lupi.”

Cole answered him gravely. He was a completely different person from the boy who seemed he would cry at having his feet pecked by chickens.

“That's it. You knew the name, searched for the truth, and ended up here. You seem to have luck on your side, seeing as how you're still alive.. maybe you're a lad who's already used to this harsh world.”

Cole had once said that many of the people in Lupi were killed when sword-bearing missionaries conquered the village. After hearing Reynolds, the boy tightened his fists and nodded.

“And this miss, who's from the north but appears to be a nun.. I won't even bother asking. After all, merchants can't take their money with them to the afterlife, only memories.”

Reynolds smiled, wincing slightly. Holo smiled at him in return. She understood that seeing only happy things until the day you die is impossible.

“Then let's talk about the God of Lupi. Just before the end of the summer before the last, missionaries and mercenaries both campaigned in the northern mountains and plains. Something happened in a village then, and I learned about it from a company that's a close partner of mine.”

“Diva Company.”

If their opponent thought they didn't know anything about the topic, they might lie to hide something or joke around. Thus, Lawrence felt compelled to show that he wasn't entirely naïve, and Reynolds smiled as if he understood his reasons.

“I wouldn't lie to someone who brought a letter from she-wolf Boland. I respect her, so I respect you, Kraft Lawrence, who is trusted by her.”

He smiled, but it was clearly a facade – he was angry. Lawrence knew it wasn't because he had done anything wrong, because this kind of rule-setting routine was normal practice between merchants.

“Sorry, I shouldn't interrupt you so rudely.”

“That's alright. If I'm left to my own devices, I'll start drifting off-topic and waste time. So if you know the background already, I'll just stick to the point.”

Reynolds coughed and assumed a better posture. He stared at the wall to focus his memories.

“For some reason, that mighty Church that's so impossible to resist ended up sending someone to Diva to discuss the matter.. they said 'we came to the northern mountains to confirm their myths. And some of these myths aren't typical – they have clear structures, backgrounds, and results. As such, merchants, who are better-suited to handle such worldly matters, should be able to discover the truths behind them.'”

In other words, it was hardly a discussion – it was an order. Reynolds was only daring to reveal this because he strongly disliked the Church.

“Just as we get the impression that alchemists can do anything, the Church figured that we – who are suspected of doing immoral business – could do anything. These kinds of orders always come from the top.”

“So true.”

After Lawrence expressed his agreement, Reynolds nodded in satisfaction.

Orders were issued by emperors to royal merchants, from royal merchants to their companies, from those companies to their branches, and those branches to their normal merchants. Even when one was ordered directly by the emperor, they were still only ordered to fetch the same goods that a normal merchant could bring.

Orders came from the top to the bottom, unlike the tributes which would go from the bottom to the top. That was the way of things.

“Our company lies on the river of the pagan nymph named Roam. It's not like we can resist an order from the Church. But still..”

Reynolds shook his head. The droopy flesh on his face seemed to crafted precisely so that gesture would carry more weight.

“..it was like watching our money flowing away down the river.”

Lawrence nodded his understanding before he took a look at the bones in the box. Normally when a company intensively searched for something, it wasn't because it was readily available in large quantities. So these were probably just assorted animal bones.

That's because once people heard that it was for illicit business, they would come out of the woodwork to sell them all the bones they would buy. In business, legal trades would suit the legal prices of the goods in question, but shady deals involving illegal goods would have no set prices.

Still, if D'Jeans and Diva could collect something convincing enough for the Church, they'd still be able to make a profit. And given that bones were everywhere, it was a pretty safe bet.. or at least it should have been, until the ones forced into the gamble got in trouble.

“At that time they were preparing for a celebration. I heard they'd pay a thousand gold coins for the real bones, maybe even two.”

“And-”

Reynolds chuckled at himself, and Cole jumped in.

“And? Did you find them?”

Reynolds's eyes shrank down until they looked like tiny white glass beads. Cole's question was a rude breach of conduct between merchants. But Reynolds quickly reverted his eyes to those of a normal businessman who was stuck watching over chickens as they foraged in his office.

A merchant wouldn't get angry over such rudeness; they knew it was a business custom, and that such a breach simply meant they weren't dealing with a proper merchant.

“*Had* I found them, I would now be seated at the head of a golden table. To be sure, there was a rumor that I found them.. I was even threatened. And think about it: how could I receive such a large payment of gold *and* keep it a secret?”

His scoffing tone made it clear how ridiculous the idea was. If he was paid 1000 gold coins, any merchant in the area would notice. It was like moving a large mountain.. even if you did it under cover of darkness, people would notice on the following morning. It was impossible to keep it a secret.

Cole seemed to understand, and nodded as if he was sorry he had asked. But then he actually thanked Reynolds, causing the merchant's eyes to open wide. Thanking someone for answering their impolite question wasn't something that most apprentices Cole's age remembered to do.

Reynolds might be stuck sitting alone in his office with nothing to do, but he had the eyes of a good merchant. Those eyes were now directed at Lawrence.

“It appears that you have a fine apprentice, Mr. Lawrence.”

Indeed, his eyes were as sharp as an eagle's.

“He's not my apprentice.”

“What?”

Reynolds was beside himself. He looked at Cole and then back at Lawrence.

“He's a prospective scholar of Church Law.. if I taught him the ways of a merchant I'd never be able to enter heaven.”

Reynolds's expression was quite difficult to describe. If Lawrence could control his that well, he'd probably also have no trouble controlling Holo. Reynolds was shocked, and began tapping his forehead.

"I see. From the north; a prospective Church scholar; tracing the myths of his origins; right, right. So *that's* why that she-wolf trusts you.. your travels must be complicated indeed, not to mention admirable."

Merchants understood the networks between power and friendship. To them a prospective Church scholar was like a golden egg. Anyone with any smarts would know to invest on such a prospect. That's precisely what Reynolds's eyes were suggesting right now.

He shifted his glance to Holo for a moment, and then finally back to Lawrence.

"Then, I take it this young miss is from a famous convent?"

Holo would of course have noticed his sharp gaze on Cole – it was like an eagle eying it's prey. However, he hadn't stared the same way at Holo. Perhaps he was trying to act casually, or perhaps he felt it would be impolite to pry into Holo's background without at least meeting her eyes first.

In either case, Holo reacted uncomfortably. Her mind was no less sharp than theirs, and she clearly grasped his intent. As Reynolds asked his question, she clung to the side of Lawrence's jacket. She acted every bit like a shy girl emphasizing that Lawrence was her protector.

Merchants craved that which God owned, and coveted the possessions of their fellow man.. it was ingrained in their nature. And so, Holo's act was brutally effective.



“Hahaha..”

As Reynolds laughed, Lawrence noted a cunning smile on Holo's face. A silent mental war had ended, and Reynolds laughed in acknowledgment of his defeat.

“You're quite the customers! Alright, it'll be lunch soon.. in celebration of our meeting, let's share a meal.”

It was a suggestion Lawrence was hoping to hear; anything to keep this invigorating conversation going.

“My sincerest thanks.”

“My pleasure. Then pardon me while I inform my staff.”

Reynolds stole a glance at the loading zone behind Lawrence.

“I was hoping to prepare a chicken, but it seems we're suddenly out of stock.”

“Oh!”

Cole shouted, and Holo's eyes wandered around the room. It seemed that Holo's scare-tactic was highly effective.. there were no chickens in sight.

“If you wouldn't mind, could you go invite my neighbors to lunch?”

He mischievously asked Cole and Holo, clearly realizing they were the culprits.

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Chicken and wine.. if salt and bread were necessities for survival, chicken and wine were necessities for the enjoyment of life. It was even more enjoyable to Lawrence when someone was offering them to him.

Reynolds had barely finished saying “please help yourselves” before Holo emptied her first plate. Cole behaved in the manner of a prospective Church scholar, thanking Reynolds for lunch and saying a prayer. He clearly felt Reynolds was generous for not only sharing the story about the wolf-god's bones, but also offering them lunch.

During the feast Lawrence came to understand the details of that story, the riots that resulted from it, and their aftermath. But merchants shared such stories as part of trade; they expected

there to be a give-and-take involved, and Lawrence was no stranger to this line of thinking. But he didn't know what compensation Reynolds was hoping for until they prepared to leave.

Reynolds spoke as he shook hands with Lawrence.

“Please send my greetings to Eve Boland.”

Both of Reynolds's hands grasped Lawrence's right hand. He stared at Lawrence with an all-business look. Lawrence realized this meant he wanted Eve to know he had been generous to them, and shared not just the story but also lunch. Clearly, his goal was to improve his business relations with Eve.

D'Jean's wasn't a dazzling company, but their trading partners, Diva, controlled the copper mines. It shouldn't be necessary for Reynolds to solidify his business relationship with Eve.. was she just that influential in the business world?

Lawrence found himself puzzled by all of this, but he was obligated to respect Reynolds's wish so he promised to honor his request before leaving. Reynolds hadn't even wanted to greet them properly, but now he was lingering at the door as he saw them off.

“So..”

Lawrence began talking, but hesitated as he reflected on their visit. Their task had been easily accomplished, but he felt troubled by almost everything they had discussed. What had left D'Jean Company in such bad shape? Why did Reynolds change his tune so quickly upon seeing Eve's letter? And why did he behave so suspiciously as they left?

None of these things were related to the wolf-god's bones, but they did reflect strangely on Reynolds. Lawrence stroked his chin as he pondered.

“So.. what shall we do next, you mean?”

Holo snapped him back to reality. As he caught sight of her face, Lawrence couldn't help but remember the chicken dish they had been served. It was made of chicken legs stewed with spices, chili seeds, and vinegar.. quite a luxurious meal, really.

It was obviously delicious, given how Holo had tucked into the meal and how there was still spice stuck to her face. As Lawrence picked it off, she closed her eyes with an annoyed look. But Lawrence knew she wasn't upset because he was treating her like a child.

She then turned to Cole and winked. Cole seemed surprised, but nodded in admiration. Lawrence could only sigh.. they had probably bet on whether or not Lawrence would pick the

spice off her face.

“Yes, I mean what shall we do next?”

He knew it was his loss as soon as he responded, but all he could do anyhow was pretend he hadn't noticed her wink at Cole, who now changed the subject.

“He was surprisingly open.. I didn't expect that.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I thought he'd hide a lot of the truth from us.”

Hearing Cole's insight, Lawrence looked over at Holo. Their eyes met, but soon separated. It looked as though Holo also had her reservations about Reynolds's openness.

“...indeed. We can be sure the Church takes the myths of Lupi village seriously. It seems there is something real behind their beliefs. That's a huge lead for us.”

Cole nodded seriously. But if Holo had noticed something strange in Reynolds's behavior, things weren't that simple. Cole was honest, and wasn't as emotionally fragile as Holo about his home, but discussing it carelessly still wasn't a good idea. They'd have to ease their way into the subject, Lawrence felt.

“But things went far too smoothly.”

“Eh?”

Cole tilted his head in curiosity as he looked at Lawrence. He expressed his inner feelings so openly that it made his expression more endearing than Holo's.

“It was just too easy.. we didn't have any excuse to corner him and ask him about our other big question.”

“Uh.. you mean about the copper coins?”

Only fifty-seven crates of copper coins had arrived from further upstream, yet D'Jean's sent sixty overseas. It was intriguing. Lawrence suspected it was a weakness of D'Jean Company they could use to their advantage if D'Jean Company wanted to obscure the truth about the god-wolf's bones, and Reynolds tried to puzzle them. Cole surely understood this.

The discrepancy in the number of crates still puzzled Lawrence, and he couldn't figure it out on



his own, but he felt it unnecessary to ask Cole. The boy would probably reveal it out of gratitude when their travels came to an end. But Cole did know the answer, and smiled to himself.

“It's alright, though. We'll just ask Eve for more information when we thank her. That's really all we can do. And actually it would be risky to move too quickly.. if she starts to suspect we know something she doesn't, it won't end well.”

“Oh.. that's right.. if we're too serious she'll think what we're looking for really *does* exist, won't she?”

The boy caught on very quickly. Lawrence nodded.

“Reynolds and Eve let us know about this because they thought hard about it and figured it would be safe to tell us. They'd keep their mouths shut tight as clams if they suspected that there was a shred of truth behind the story of the bones.”

The only reason Lawrence and Cole could believe the myth of the bones was legitimate was because they were traveling with Holo.

Cole flashed Lawrence an “a-ok” gesture to Lawrence, like a dog proudly wagging it's tail after showing off to it's master. It was impossible to be upset when he acted proudly.. it was like he was born to make others happy.

“It's easier to ask since no one believes in the story.. and it's funny because we're asking just to confirm it.”

“And to affirm our belief that we're the only ones who know.”

Cole nodded.

“Consider this.. when the god of the Church was asked if he would save mankind, he gave no answer. But he wasn't lazy, so the question itself must be problematic.”

The young scholar's voice rang out like a new bell.

“The only explanation.. is that this is natural.”

Talking to Cole wasn't like talking to Holo.. it comforted Lawrence. He felt he could understand why the boy was always repeating their words over and over again.

They talked as they walked, with Cole unconsciously walking by Lawrence's side. It was a

pleasant experience. If they could do this again in ten years, they would surely be the best of friends. Lawrence found himself hoping that might come true.

But someone else came between them.. the one they had left out of the conversation, Holo.

“Just what are you two conversing about so happily?”

She seemed displeased, and Lawrence wasn't sure why.. but for his own good, he decided not to dwell on it.

“If we are going to that fox, there is a place I would like to visit first.”

“Don't tell me..”

As he spoke, Holo pointed to the mouth of the river.

“It is that crowded spot over there.”

Of course it was the market on the delta. Her tail was waving under her cloak.. she must have been anticipating more delicious food. An intellectual conversation with Cole came crashing back down to basics.

Cole hesitated before nodding.. Holo was mentioning the delta half for his sake, after all. Lawrence couldn't simply rank Cole's intelligent conversation over her simple desires, because Holo's actions always concealed something. And so, Lawrence also hid behind his answer.

“Your mind is *always* set on eating..”

Holo rolled her eyes, then pursed her lips and whispered to him.

“But *you* are the one that is always on my mind..”

She raised her tone slightly to enhance her coquettish behavior, then held onto his arm. Cole was too embarrassed to know where to look. It made Lawrence feel a bit proud, but he wasn't supposed to express that right now.. he knew how she wanted him to respond.

“So this is what it feels like to be food.”

Holo smiled, satisfied by his reply, and waved the ears under her hood.

“It may be less stressful if you loosen your purse strings, perhaps?”

Lawrence looked at Cole, as if asking the boy to interpret her.

“Um.. I believe that's miss Holo's way of thanking you in advance..”

“Damn.. and I was hoping to save some money for wine.”

If Cole wasn't going to continue the game, then Lawrence could only end it.

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There was a huge reservoir in the middle of the Gerube delta. In it were many different kinds of fish, and the odd tortoise or aquatic bird. But there was no nymph with long, flowing locks of golden hair, nor was any conversation being held in beautifully poetic words.

It was a place of numbers and competitions of price-lowering. The voices one heard were all rough and strong, just like the hands that caught the fish there. Those who working in the market referred to the reservoir as “the Stream of Gold.”

The market stretched two hundred paces north and south of the reservoir, three hundred to the east, and four hundred to the west. Those extents had been decided-upon a long, long time ago. Though there was more room on the delta, Lawrence had never heard of the market expanding.

The building methods used on the delta seemed designed to use as little land as possible. The buildings were packed together so closely that merchants would often joke that they could spy the transaction records of their neighbors.

Holo carefully concealed her ears as they approached the delta; they may have been joking on their way there, but this was no time to be play-acting. Gerube's largest market was *always* crowded and noisy.

After Lawrence paid a toll, the three of them crossed the bridge to the delta. Cole, the first one to set foot on the ground, was so surprised at the scene he beheld that he asked Holo about it.

“Are they holding a festival here today?”

Of the three ports on the delta, they were near the one for boats traveling to and from the north. They could see all the famous sights of the market from here, including a large door made out of the wood salvaged from a ship that sank in the reef.

The market was at it's busiest ahead of them; the people there were so packed together that they couldn't see anything but those in front of them and the shops beside them.

“Hmm? This many people is typical. I have been to towns that are packed like this everywhere, and not just their marketplace.”

Holo's wore a proud expression, as though she felt superior to Cole. She stood up tall, though in Lawrence's eyes she had no right to feel superior.

“R-really? The busiest town I've ever been to is Akent..”

“Well, that is to be expected. When one is young, there is more they do *not* know than they *do* know. You can take your time to learn.”

“Indeed, I even remember *you* reacting the same way the first time you visited a busy city like this.”

Lawrence placed his hand on her head as he interjected. She had lived in Pasloe village for centuries, during which time the world had greatly changed. She had grown older, but it wasn't as though she knew more than Cole did about the modern world.. she might even know *less*.

That being said, she was just like Lawrence.. both of them wanted to demonstrate their superior knowledge. Holo brushed his hand aside and reacted angrily.

“You truly are narrow-minded. Do you really need to win so badly?”

“Right back at you. As I recall, the largest city you've ever been to was Ruvinheigen.”

Holo's face turned red. Cole stared at them, obviously nervous. But Holo's expression clearly betrayed how much she was enjoying this play-fight.

“Well, you are a peddler who travels to make ends meet. But I was a prisoner.. I could hardly visit every corner of this world. Or.. are you saying you are no longer willing to help me?”

Her words were boldly accusatory, as though their entire journey until now she had been working to avoid such an outcome.. fearful of being cast aside if she made a mistake.

Cole had no idea how seriously to take this – he couldn't hide how concerned he was. And of course, Lawrence and Holo simply continued their play for their little boy audience. Lawrence replied from the bottom of his heart.

“Merchants struggle to part with their money.. but so long as that's not involved, I'll do anything for you.”

“Such as?”

In a rare moment, Holo had to cover her smiling mouth with her sleeve.

“Such as? Hmm..”

Lawrence acted as though he was deep in thought. Holo anxiously pushed her fist into his chest, pulling him back to her by his shirt.

“Surely you are not going to wait to tell me later, in bed?”

Lawrence held back from saying “you mean like you did to me earlier this morning?”

Cole clearly thought they had been arguing, so he didn't expect such an abrupt change in mood. His face went beet-red and he swallowed in response to their philandering. Lawrence could definitely see the appeal of being an actor.

“Indeed, that won't require any money.. but every time I come to your bed, you've already passed out from drinking.”

Holo jumped away with a cunning smile on her face. Lawrence knew she was waiting for this, so he had prepared himself.

“How can I resist the drink when your words are so dry and tedious?”

Lawrence was now able to act normally when he and Holo engaged in their tete-a-tetes. He felt his progress would surely be appreciated.

“Well then, shall we wander around?”

She knew better than to carry on joking, but couldn't resist licking her lips suggestively as she spoke. She wanted to wander around; not to look at the market, but to look at the food in the market. She may have just eaten a lovely chicken lunch, but it seemed that wasn't enough.

“Does this town have any delicacies?”

Cole might have been lost by their rapid-fire play-acting, but he could still understand Holo's gesture.. and so he asked his innocent question.

“You make it sound as though I am the only one who wishes to eat.”

“Ah.. no.. that's not what I meant..”

Holo was smiling playfully as she teased the boy. The rear of her robe rose slightly.. her tail must be happily wagging underneath, since Cole had no words to counter her. She walked ahead of them and passed through the door, turning back to them and shouting.

“Quickly now!”

The market was crowded and noisy, but that didn't stop people from noticing the attractively bright voice of a girl.

A nearby merchant, chiseling on a stone tablet, looked up at Holo and his hands began moving without direction. He looked thin, like an Ascetic, but Holo could tell he had a long way to go before he could be considered a recluse free of worldly desires.

He followed Holo's gaze back to Lawrence, shooting him an unpleasant stare before acting as though nothing had happened. He then continued chiseling at his stone tablet. But Lawrence could detect him stealing glances at Holo out of the corner of his eye.. he could only smile.

“Do not tarry so! Come!”

She could probably sense the eyes watching her, even as she shouted at them with her tail raised. But suddenly, she stopped.. she might be a good actor, but she couldn't fool those who watched her long enough, like Lawrence.

Right now she definitely wasn't acting. Like the young merchant before him, Lawrence followed her gaze and saw what he hadn't expected. Cole, too, turned to look, but hastily covered his mouth when he saw what they were looking at.

What Holo had spotted, just getting off of a boat, was a merchant who was quite familiar to them.

“Um.. uh..”

That merchant was dressed in her usual manner. Her eyes appeared tired, yet still radiated confidence.. they seemed to be announcing that she could buy everything in sight. But the look of surprise on her face was clearly genuine.

There were two well-dressed men and two fierce-looking men with her, and Lawrence and his party just happened to run into the five of them.

The merchant chipping away at the stone tablet fled into the market as soon as he noticed Eve. The fishermen around them, waiting for paying customers, also lowered their heads as if they

had seen a nymph while out at sea.

It seemed that the men with Eve considered those reactions normal.. Lawrence was the strange one to them. They sized him up while murmuring to each other. They soon seemed to come to the conclusion that he was a small fry, and groaned before looking at Eve as if to ask “who the hell is *he*?”

“And here I thought you were heading south.. but it seems you guys are more interested in being tourists.”

The youngest man was paying their boatman, but Eve paid no attention to that; instead she happily greeted Lawrence. It seemed she was actually staring past him at Holo, with anxious eyes. The two well-dressed men with her continued to stare at Lawrence while chatting among themselves.

“Yes, indeed. I've halted business for a while, until my wound recovers.”

He could feel Holo's eyes burning a hole in his back, so he answered sarcastically. Eve surely understood, since she squinted and raised her right hand. The two well-dressed men smiled, and the fierce ones walked off into the market as though they hadn't even noticed Lawrence.

As they entered the market, the crowd parted like Moses was crossing the Red Sea.. they were probably powerful figures in Gerube. Holo seemed to intentionally avoid them, and made her way to Lawrence and Eve as they talked.

“I said I would stay at home and rest, but those two asked me to come out here. They're influential men from the north end of Gerube.”

“Merchants?”

Eve shook her head in response.

“Not merchants.. just good at calculating things.”

The spark of hatred in Eve's eyes made it clear that they held special privileges in town: they were landowners, fishing authorities, maybe tax collectors. Lawrence could see them earning money by just pointing fingers at others while they sat on chairs.

They had been extremely polite to Eve.. perhaps they understood how useful Eve was, or perhaps they simply had power but were without a noble's title, like Eve. The reason wasn't obvious, so Lawrence's curiosity was piqued.

“Oh? Interested? Then come to the Stream of Gold. Well, pardon me.”

Eve stole one last look at Holo as she left, disappearing into the crowd. She seemed capable of controlling even whether crowds would notice her. Lawrence watched her with admiration, only snapping back to reality after being kicked by Holo.

“How dare you ogle another girl instead of me?”

It was a familiar attack, but Lawrence put his hands on his hips instead of answering directly.

“Oh? Are you saying that you desire my eyes to look only at you from now on?”

He pulled his face close to hers as he asked. But Holo showed no mercy, and slapped his face before storming off red-faced into the market.

“Ah, miss Holo!”

Cole instinctively began following her, but hesitated and turned back.

“Uh.. um..”

“Hmm?”

“Are you not going to chase her, Mr. Lawrence?”

Of course it was expected that Lawrence should chase her.. even Cole knew that.

“No, I will not. Because she wishes it to be you.”

“But that's..”

“Impossible, right?”

Lawrence finished his sentence and ruffled Cole's hair. But Cole didn't immediately tidy that hair.. he seemed lost in thought.

“You have a good brain, but if you focus on our conversation just now you'll understand why I can't let myself chase her like that.”

Lawrence smiled as he tidied Cole's hair for him.

“She truly is angry.. but our quarreling is just an act.”

Lawrence pulled a silver coin out of the wallet on his belt and placed it on Cole's nose.

"Take this. It should be enough for you two to indulge in quite a feast.. just please don't let her drink too much."

Cole accepted the coin, but he was clearly puzzled as to why Lawrence wasn't chasing her.

"She saw right through me, you see. My heart was moved by Eve's influence. But she hates Eve, and doesn't even want to see her again."

Still puzzled, the boy looked up at Lawrence as if to ask "and?" But Lawrence didn't continue, he simply pushed Cole's back so he would run after Holo.

"If you want to know the rest, ask her."

Cole hesitated for a few moments, but he was clever enough to sense the mood. He ran after Holo, and Lawrence knew Holo wouldn't have any trouble spotting him.. even in a crowd.

"Alright."

Eve suggested that he find her at the Stream of Gold, and Lawrence immediately understood what she meant. As a rule, the Stream of Gold was where all city-related discussions took place. If a meeting was held in the north side, it would be considered skewed in their favor, and so forth. This was a way to balance the scales.

Powerful figures, including a merchant from a declined family of nobles, were in the city right now.. any merchant worth his reputation would go to her, no matter what she had done to them.

Of course, Holo had no trouble making Lawrence come to her as well.. but she also knew what that would mean for their relationship. She would rather let Lawrence question Eve then risk moving too quickly. In essence, they had just made a deal. He chuckled to himself for being able to understand her to this degree, and scratched his brow while wondering if she would be surprised.

"So her fee was a silver coin.."

Holo had stormed off with her nose in the air.. but she wasn't really upset. And so, Lawrence stepped into the crowd. He found that he was also able to skillfully blend in, as he slowly made his way through the unstable and noisy market.

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The market was like a world unto itself. The rumor was that it had been built by driving huge piles into a foundation of sand, but no one knew if that was really true. Most of the buildings were made of stone so the market wouldn't wash away.

Nails would soon rust if they were made of wood, so it made sense.. but Lawrence worried whether these heavy buildings would eventually sink. He hadn't heard of that happening, though. What did happen was that the wind blew sand into the space between buildings, making the market look like a desert city in the far south.

Lawrence heard many different accents throughout the crowd as he made his way to the Stream of Gold. Around the water was a circular plaza with four paths extending from the water in it's center.

There was also a long, black, iron pillar with three salted fish hanging from it as though by magic. A seagull stood atop that pillar. By the water there were three groups of tables and desks, with a soldier standing near each. The soldiers wore leather armor on their chests and held spears twice their height.

A casual glance also revealed that all of the second-floor windows of the buildings around the reservoir were open. The people gazing out of those windows were well-dressed merchants; some even had servants attending them as they gazed down on the people on the street.

Lawrence wasn't in the mood to watch from a window, so he bought a beer from a nearby stall and walked up to the tables. He stood and listened to the conversations around him. He didn't see Eve, but noticed a few of her associates seated at a table, talking with the others around them. What were they discussing? He didn't have to ask.

Merchants weren't ones to keep secrets. Their lips were sealed when it came to profits, of course, but other rumors flowed freely from their mouths. Just listening to their loud, boorish conversations was enough to judge how strong their liquor was.

Many had probably arrived by boat, all drunk now to the point where a conversation would be difficult to understand. But Lawrence could still make out that the meeting was about whether the market on the delta ought to expand.

He had heard such rumors before; this must have been debated hundreds of times. On it's surface it was a simple matter: if the market expanded, more merchants would sell goods, raising the cities' tax revenues.

As such, one would expect such a motion to be passed without much debate. But reality was

never that straightforward. Merchants pushed for expansion, but their cries fell on the deaf ears of the ruling class, who didn't want to risk the erosion of their profits.

Lawrence drank his beer, looking at the merchants around him with disdain. He had hoped to see an intense competition for profit.

He was suddenly distracted by the gull atop the pillar, which took off at the toll of a bell. The crowd fell silent. He watched as everyone seated rose, placed their right hands on top of one another, and shouted, "In the name of Roam, master of the river!"

The meeting began. They all sat back down, each of the soldiers waving their spears to the sky in response. The ritual was like some ancient imperial ceremony used by the wise. Such formalities were necessary to officiate meetings. But based on how they were acting, no one really cared about this meeting.

If the meetings of a city's ruling body weren't authoritative it would mean chaos, like mercenaries without a commander. It wasn't much different from ruling a country, in which kings announced that their powers were granted by God.

Lawrence drank his beer, smiling and muttering to himself.

"Trouble is everywhere."

"That's just the kind of thing you'd say."

This unexpected reply made Lawrence nearly spray beer from his mouth. He nervously turned to the speaker, Eve, who wasn't taking part in the meeting.

"Why so nervous? Are you hiding something?"

Her eyes betrayed that she was smiling under her scarf.

"Merchants hide their secrets and money in their wallets."

"..and carry them to the grave, right?"

"Exactly."

He gave an exaggerated shrug, Eve smiled happily like a noblewoman from the city.

"What do you want from a normal merchant like me, anyway?"

“Normal, huh? I'll never forget the moment my throat was grasped 'normally'.”

Lawrence was wholly embarrassed to be reminded of that, but it was true.. even the greatest general would remember the time they were bitten and cried.

“I expected you'd be up there with the heads of the meeting.”

“For this kind of thing? What could I possibly gain up there? Why don't I just pray to God?”

She narrowed her eyes and surveyed the tables as she spoke. He looked at her face, but couldn't divine her inner thoughts. He wasn't sure how she'd take it if he continued talking.. if she was a wolf like Holo she'd probably take it personally.

A loud cough from the head table formally declared the start of the meeting.

“This meeting is called to order.”

As Lawrence had overheard, the meeting was about the expansion of the delta market. The one speaking was one of the well-dressed men who was with Eve earlier. He seemed accustomed to public speaking.

“I won't say this meeting is useless.. but don't you always feel like these meetings are just formalities, and that nothing will actually get solved?”

Lawrence hesitated before answering.. his mind was being slowly poisoned by feelings of envy.

“Then, Ms. Eve, what you're surely saying is that you're the one making those 'real decisions?’”

Perhaps she had noticed his envy, because she simply shrugged and sighed.

“Just speak your mind already.”

“One of the movers and shakers is wasting their time on someone like me.. I can't help but feel conflicted.”

As he finished talking, he worried that he was conveying too much emotion. But then again, it *was* a reasonable response. Being trusted by a powerful figure was a great honor for a powerless merchant like him.

And yet, Eve seemed stunned by his words. As he wondered if they were really that surprising, Eve turned her attention back to the meeting. The north and south factions were debating, but they didn't seem impassioned.. it looked rather silly, in fact.

When she turned back to him, he expected her to be wearing the same kind of expression she showed to Cole earlier, but it was closer to the one she wore when they had fought in Lenos.

“Would you laugh if I told you I'm glad you're openly honest with me?”

With that, it made sense why she kept looking around at the meeting as they talked.. it seemed that wolves were utterly incapable of being openly honest.

“Yes, I would.”

Merchants were never completely open with each other. They wore different masks when they did business. Because of that, if he made her happy enough to invite him to join her for some behind-the-scenes entertainment, it was no fault of his. No one could blame him for feeling the way he did, and it was fine for him to be open about it.

It was once said that merchants could only make friends with other merchants.. if that were true, it meant that those around a successful merchant would always hide their true feelings and just try to please them.

Even heroes of legend needed a respite from this kind of thing, so Eve ought to really be happy with Lawrence's honesty. She looked at the ground for a time, and when she raised her head her eyes were clear as though snow had fallen in them and melted.



“It was the right decision to greet you when I saw you earlier. Frankly, being stopped by those guys was really depressing.”

Eve pointed at the people speaking during the meeting.

“Because it didn't involve profit?”

Eve curled her lips at his playful remark.. it was obvious to Lawrence, even if it was hidden behind her scarf. She snatched away his beer in response.

“But for me, who has to be so aggressive in Lenos and on the river, it might be one of the reasons that I find this place so comfortable.”

She either had a political benefactor, or the capital and backing of investors who could operate outside the legal system. Lawrence had never been at her level.. it was all new to him.

Her family had declined, but she still held a noble title and climbed her way back up from rock-bottom. She must have a lot of benefactors that others didn't see.

The men had shown her respect when Lawrence saw them at the pier, but based on her expression things weren't quite as simple as they seemed.

“I was kind of like a bodyguard to them, always getting ridiculous orders. Do you how this market came to be?”

Lawrence honestly shook his head.

“A few decades back, some merchant from the south suggested building it. He said it would be a good base for trading with the north. So some merchants tried to buy the delta from it's landowners. But the landowners figured it would be a huge loss to sell their land, so they decided to built the market on their own. It cost some of them dearly.”

“The landowners were from the north, and the ones who lent them money were from the south?”

Eve lowered her scarf, drank some beer, fixed the scarf, then handed the beer back to Lawrence.

“That's right. Those merchants speaking up there are the sons of those lenders. The landowners kept their land and earned a hefty rent fee, but they had to pay it right back to the lenders with interest. So those unsatisfied landowners tried to find a way out of it.”



“And failed.”

Eve nodded, her eyes becoming cold enough to suggest that people's lives were worth less than profits.

“So what's the next generation looking for? Simply put, it's a scapegoat.”

“Someone to blame for this difficult problem, huh?”

Eve's face calmed like the surface of a lake. One day her abilities could make her a powerful merchant, but right now she was just a merchant with some money.

She was tasked with solving this problem that everybody knew was impossible to solve. And the people who assigned this task didn't expect a solution.. they just wanted her to fail so they could punish her; a scapegoat.

As the one who had lost in their encounter, Lawrence had been hoping Eve was someone who was at the top of the their game.

“Ah.. right.. I'm good at dragging others into my misfortune. You learned that in Lenos.”

Eve spoke calmly.. she was strong, but different from Lawrence. They didn't live in the same world.

“Yes.. as I expected, this had been pretty gloomy.”

“Oh ho.. you're *always* straightforward, aren't you? But that's what this place is like.. even the profits from exporting copper are exploited by the ruling class.”

Nothing was worse than having power without the money to back it up. That's why the rich only took risks when they had to.

“Right, well, I don't want to drag you into my gloom.. so come find me when you have a problem that needs solving. Thanks for the beer.”

As Eve left, Lawrence shouted to her.

“By the way, I managed to get information about those bones!”

She turned back for a moment, wearing a neutral expression. As she walked away, Lawrence was certain she was smiling under her scarf.. she was intentionally acting that way as if to say “just what I wanted to hear.”

He didn't look at the other merchants. His eyes followed Eve, as she left the crowd and greeted some merchants who seemed to be different. Based on their clothes, Lawrence judged them to be from the south. Like Eve, they were probably the bodyguards of the treasury in the south side of the city.

If he learned their names and stories, he'd probably root for them as well, but right now his heart was supporting Eve. In Lenos, Lawrence gained an appreciation for her sly and determined nature. On the Roam river, he gained an appreciation for her single-mindedness.

But here, she was the one being used. Of course, while being used she was also using her opponents. She easily broke free of the Church-supported Lenos, and didn't even plan to remain in Gerube. Instead she was taking her furs to the south.

Lawrence was finally beginning to understand.. she wasn't a hero who could change the world with a sword. She was just a regular merchant who always had to struggle to pull herself out of the mud. A great merchant had once said that merchants were never the main characters in the story of this world.

After reflecting on it, Lawrence felt relieved that Holo wasn't there with him. He stared down at the bottle in his hand and thought, "this way I can at least have some beer instead of wine." He knew how pathetic his face must look right now.

It wasn't strange for Holo to be angry when she heard about the Church abusing the remains of her kin to convert others to their faith. Lawrence wasn't Reynolds, and he didn't own D'Jean Company, but he also wanted to take happy memories with him to his grave.

He whispered in his heart before looking back at the aggressive debate taking place in the meeting. He drank the rest of his beer with a sigh.

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The goods of many nations were on display in the delta market. It was like a miniaturization of the world, a place where one could find themselves charmed by the many languages they heard in the air. But hearing it was much more interesting than seeing it.

This wasn't the type of big, open market that was held several times during the year, where goods were piled on display high into the sky. There were no troupes of musicians or actors earning money from the traveling peddlers and casual shoppers.

There certainly were crowds, but the various stalls didn't display much of their stock. There were mostly signs with tags listing the names and prices of goods available, and one had to ask

an attendant to see actual samples.

There were many dishes to savor, but nowhere to savor them in this crowded and narrow place. At best, one could find tiny and roofless stalls selling beer and wine. But because it was liveliness, not rowdiness, that was wanted here, such stalls were few in number and soldiers with longswords patrolled the area.

Lawrence was easily able to work his way straight to his destination. Anyone with a good mind could easily understand the basic layout of this small market. But it was probably more likely that he would be found first, before he found who he was looking for.

Holo and Cole were probably having fun, so after watching such a disappointingly stupid conversation between the ruling merchants, Lawrence walked to the nearest inns in search of them. As he entered one, he heard someone call him from upstairs.

“Hey, you.”

He didn't reply at first. He walked inside and made his way to the second floor, entering the small room that he had been called to, before finally speaking without a trace of sarcasm.

“How extravagant..”

“Really? It only cost that one silver coin.”

Tables and chairs had been placed by the window, and Holo sat on the sill drinking. He could have seen her from the street. He wasn't sure if she was drunk or just confident, but she wasn't trying to hide her ears and tail.

“I think maybe I should teach you again how much a silver coin is worth..”

He picked a cup up off the ground and smelled it before sighing. She was quite a glutton for wine and food, but she was still very picky about their quality.

“Where's Cole?”

He assumed by all the empty plates on the table that she had sent the boy out to order more food.

“What you are thinking is correct.”

She had probably grown too hot after drinking, and decided to enjoy the breeze from outside. Her face showed just how pleasant it was.

“As usual, you boss other people around freely without a trace of guilt.”

He filled a cup with wine and sat on the bed in the room. It wasn't soft, but to those just getting off a ship – where the conditions were like a dog kennel – it was as pleasant as the finest mattress from a palace. In fact, someone crammed in a boat until their breaking point would no longer need the teachings of the Church to appreciate such a room.

Of course, Holo had never experienced that harsh reality. He wished that just once she would feel some guilt for such behavior.

“You learned something good, did you not?”

Holo was staring out the window with her head against the bars, as the breeze blew past her face. She seemed to be enjoying the music from outside and ruminating about something. Her ears flicked around as she listened.

“I did?”

He sipped on some wine; it was just the right kind to drink while resting.

“Well, you seem happy at least.”

Her eyes were closed, but somehow that only made it seem like she could see through everything. He couldn't resist touching her face and smiling.

“I do?”

He was certain that he had wiped his facial expression after talking to Eve, but Holo just stared at him with a cunning smile.

“You are a hundred years too young to fool me.”

At first he wondered if she'd somehow heard his conversation with Eve, but then he realized that she had simply asked him in a way that would make him reveal the truth. He placed his palm on his forehead and sighed at her, as she wagged her tail in delight.

“It seems like you have figured it out. Well, you are obviously just a pup to have fallen for such a simple trick.”

“..I'll be sure to remember it.”

“I suspect your mind is too small to remember it.”

She craned her neck back as she spoke, as if she was itching to say it, then laughed heartily.

“Why you.. well, I'm certainly not happy now. Put simply, it's like you're after dry wine and not something sweeter.”

“Oh?”

She stood up, but seemed unstable.. was she tipsy from the wine?

“Ah.. I am a bit too cold now.”

She sat down next to him and leaned her back against his. Many sailors were tipsy like this after a long boat ride. Lawrence had experienced it first-hand.. and now Holo was acting the same way. They sat back-to-back as she hugged her tail. Her behavior surprised him, but if this was what she wanted..

“So what did you learn?”

Given the situation and what was on his mind, he wouldn't have been able to speak so steadily and in such a normal tone like she did. But again, he realized how easily he had let her get him flustered, and sighed once more.

“About the dark side of the city.”

“Hmm?”

“Basically, I learned about a loan.. just a much bigger one than usual.”

Holo poured wine down her throat like a mug of water after waking up. It wasn't terribly strong, but she should still take it easy. With that in mind he reached for her cup.

“I hope you realize how many words I swallowed with that wine just now.”

His arm was still reaching out as she rested herself against his shoulder.. the wolf was in his arm.

“You are usually excited to talk about money problems when they are not your own, yet this time you are not.. why is that?”

She burped after another sip, then took his hand and placed her cup into it.

“Just what did you discuss with that fox?”

It seemed impossible to hide anything from Holo. He lifted the cup to his mouth and took a sip, then realized that she had pulled the wool over his eyes once again. She was laughing; it wasn't a cup of wine, just honeyed goat milk for Cole.

But if she felt it necessary to trap him this way, he didn't have to worry about her getting angry even if he told her everything. So he slowly began.

“..that clever woman, who easily bested us, is just a little girl here in this city.”

“Mmhm.”

“She isn't just being exploited by the ruling class here, she's little more than a punching bag. The one I looked up to in Lenos and on the Roam river is just a small fry over here. How should I put this..”

If he finished what he was saying, it would make Holo angry. But he'd already gone this far, and if he didn't fully explain himself then she'd probably be even *more* angry.

“I'm.. disillusioned.”

Holo didn't answer. In fact she didn't even look at him. He couldn't tolerate the silence for long, so he continued.

“If even Eve, who is such a good merchant, is like this, what does that make me? Worthless? I at least wanted the person who bested me to be someone really impressive..”

It was only natural for there to be people better than you.. Lawrence wasn't so naïve that he felt he was anything special. His self-esteem had been low for years. But the feeling hadn't grown worse with age. He worried, he felt depressed.. but he knew that no one would encourage a lonely traveling merchant. But now..

Lawrence laughed at himself. Lately, no matter if they were surprised or laughing at him, someone was there who would comfort him and help him see realities that he hadn't noticed before.. they were his motivation to carry on.

“You.”

“Hmm?”

Holo was silent for a moment before raising her head to speak.

“I am very angry at what you just said, for two reasons.”

“..really?”

“And that look on your face makes three.”

“Well, you eat five times what a normal person eats, so it makes sense you would get twice as angry.”

After he took his shot, she elbowed him before sitting up straight.

“Firstly, what you said also implies that I, your partner, am also worthless.”

Lawrence could only remain silent at this.

“Secondly, you allowed yourself to be depressed over something this stupid. I can only assume it is because you are such a young pup.”

“I must be.”

“And finally..”

She knelt on the bed, placed her hands on her hips, and looked down on him from above. It showed her unhappiness, but it was her face that Lawrence found most disconcerting. He soon realized that feeling went both ways.

“You are a coward over something so silly, showing such dependence.. so why would you even show such a face?”

“Such a.. face?”

Lawrence couldn't help but repeat her, but she froze for a moment before nodding.

“You spoke with such depression..”

She then looked away.

“..yet your face looked like you still wanted to carry that weight alone.”

Lawrence finally understood why she wasn't laughing. But he was too late. Her face was red,

possibly from the wine, as she raised her ears and gnashed her teeth. But he still replied calmly.

“But if my face showed the opposite, wouldn't you scold me?”

That didn't seem to satisfy her, and she sat there whispering to herself for a while. Then she nodded, bent her waist, swished her tail, and sighed.

“Of course I would. But when you follow me despite being scolded and played for a fool, I feel so very happy.”

“I.. don't want to be so pathetic.”

“Fool.”

Lawrence managed to find just the right time to move his arm so her light body fell into his arms. He understood her anger, and watched her as she continued to bare her teeth while in his arms.

“Should I say I'm sorry?”

“That should be an instinct by now, given how often you are wrong.”

“..”

She was his partner, and he was hers. Neither belonged to the other, they were just there to support each other. That was the way it should be.

Even if he made her angry, that anger wasn't her only reaction. It felt strange to him, but he needed to be brave enough to show his weak sides to her. He *did* want to tell her that he was nothing without her support, but..

“Well now, isn't this strange?”

“Hmm?”

“Somehow I became the one cheering *you* up.”

She flicked her ears, brushing across his cheek and making it itch. She raised her head and showed a wily smile that came from the bottom of her heart.

“It is my special privilege.”

“Oh jeez.. well, I like it this way too.”

“Oh ho..”

She chuckled, leaning into him more closely.

“Hey, you aren't planning to use Cole to toy with me again, are-”

But he swallowed the rest of his words.

“Humans are strong.. strong enough to never look back on the past.. but I have had enough.”

She was in tears, yet still managed to speak clearly. She was too wise.. she even knew when to show her weak sides to him. Now wasn't the right time, he thought, but to show his appreciation he still stroked her head gently.

“I'm a coward.. you're well aware of that, aren't you? I always look on the past with fear.. so you have no reason to worry about this.”

After he spoke, she nestled her face into his chest and rolled her head as though drying her tears.

“I do not want to be this pathetic either.”

She was so capricious.. how could he possibly answer that? He simply shot her a wry smile and spoke softly into her ear.

“I'll talk to you before I make any decisions, alright?”

“..you always give me offerings, but never stay to hear my advice.. I cannot stand it.”

Was she trying to explain something? Indeed, Lawrence's heart always became an offering when he saw her in this condition.

“Then my kindness is simply an offering?”

“It is a necessary ingredient for a prayer.”

Lawrence smiled as Holo flicked her ears.

“A prayer for what?”

She sat up tall and answered curtly.

“The return of Cole.”

“What the..”

He never wanted to admit it, but he truly couldn't win against her. She closed her eyes and smiled. For her to open her heart to him this way was significant, and Lawrence now realized why.

Indeed, Lawrence hated being ignored and excluded in business decisions. And as the god of harvest of a village, Holo had grown to hate it as well.

She had also been excluded from the talks about her homeland and the Moon-Hunting Bear.. it must have been terribly lonely, so of course she would have had enough of it.

Lawrence would have eventually figured this out, but it would have taken a while. And that's exactly how Holo would answer if she was asked why she decided to reveal her feelings this way.

“It is always difficult to find the right moment to spring my traps. But that only makes it all the more worthwhile.”

She beamed her cunning smile at him while her ears spun around towards the hallway as if she had detected new prey. Lawrence could appreciate her methods; such a wise wolf would never use the same trap twice, she simply wasn't that careless.

“I won't fall into every trap, you know.”

She silently flashed him a toothy grin, then stood up and made her way back to the window sill. His mouth still had a sweet aftertaste from the honey, but it was replaced with bitterness as she left him.

“Sorry to keep you waiting so long.”

Without fail, Cole had returned.

“Too slow! I am out of patience.. where is the wine?”

“Uh.. right here. Oh, I got some for Mr. Lawrence too!”

“What is the point in that? It is just wasted effort.”

Listening to their exchange made Lawrence laugh, but it was mostly at Holo's incredible ability to change her mood and expression. She could trap anyone easily with that skill.. it was truly terrifying. It made him decide to bite into some spicy jerky.

“So, what useful information did you gather?”

Holo didn't even bother thanking Cole, so Lawrence took a moment to do so instead of answering. The boy's efforts demanded appreciation. He had slung his ragged jacket like a bag over his shoulders to haul quite a lot of food.. Holo had clearly been demanding, and yet he managed to complete her task beautifully.

For her to not thank him meant that she was either unwilling to do so, or had even expected him to fail. If this boy became an merchant's apprentice, he would surely be one the other apprentice's couldn't compete with.

“Did you not hear me!?”

Lawrence was watching Cole skillfully set the food on the table, but Holo's unpleasant shout finally forced an answer from him.

“Yes, I heard you.”

“..well?”

“It's a matter well worth investigating. To build this market, the landowners borrowed money but couldn't return it. Moreover, D'Jean Company, who turned out to not be as powerful or evil as we expected, is just being used.”

Holo was eating some roasted clams, so Cole continued the conversation.

“..their profits are being taken from them?”

“Exactly. D'Jean's once profited from the copper trade of the Roam river, but now their profits are being siphoned away by the rulers of the north. And-”

Holo interrupted him with a loud hiccup after washing down the clam meat with some wine.

“Someone got angry about their plan to make great profits from the Church, right?”

“Indeed. And also..”

Lawrence popped a piece of fish into his mouth. He didn't know what kind of fish it was, but they hadn't removed the silvery scales before frying it. It was fresh and tender.. the oil they used to fry it was probably of a high grade. Holo freely spent a whole silver coin on just apples once, and now she was disrespecting another coin by spending it on such luxuries.

"I suspect Reynolds is to blame."

"Hmm, indeed, he was lying to us."

Cole looked at Holo's surprising interjection.

"It's easy to guess the details. We asked him about the wolf-god's bones; what would he hide if he didn't want to disclose everything?"

"He could not hide his tail even if he covered his ears, correct?"

Holo waved her ears and tail as she answered. But Reynolds was a merchant.

"The wise do not show their wisdom.. that's a saying, right? He might have been hiding horns, not ears."

"He also made sure to shake your hands before you left."

Holo was very attentive. Lawrence nodded, and picked out a scale lodged between his teeth.

"He asked me to greet Eve. But I've no idea if he's interested in her money, business, or network of contacts."

"That fox spent all of her money on fur. And even if he was unaware of her situation, he would know where she would go for money, correct?"

Holo smiled as if the situation was all a joke. It reminded Lawrence of his own attitude when he nearly went bankrupt.

"So he was interested in her business and network. In any case, the actors and stage are set, aren't they?"

Holo smiled in silent response and looked outside, while Lawrence continued eating. Cole held a cup in both hands and alternated glances between the two of them. He wasn't a bad kid, in fact he was clever enough to figure out their intention. Given their conversation, he would understand that they wanted him to listen and compare his own ideas with theirs.

“Ah.. question!”

He raised his hand. No matter how strict and odd a teacher was, they would appreciate and spoil such a serious and hardworking student. Cole might even have been lead to his downfall by the jealousy of the other students around him.

“Is Mr. Reynolds still looking for the real bones?”

Holo kept her mouth shut. But it was beyond doubt that Cole had been under the tutelage of a harsh teacher; he wasn't at all timid.

“If he wanted to hide that he was still looking for the bones, then he should have just sent us away with some sort of excuse.. but he eagerly offered us a meal because of Ms. Eve's letter? If that's why, then he must have shaken Mr. Lawrence's hands because..”

He became lost in thought. He was unaware of Eve's ability or influence, so he was judging based on his impression of her.. what did he see?

“..he wants help to do the searching?”

He moved from question to question, but they were all connected. Holo sipped her wine while watching Cole. She then smiled and turned to Lawrence.

“What do you think?”

Lawrence waved his hand in agreement. Whether Cole was correct or not, it was logical.

“This also explains why Ms. Eve gave you the letter so willingly.. she probably knew Reynolds wanted help. But he was still being careful.. he didn't tell us any important details. Maybe he just didn't trust us? But in any case, he wanted her help, and then suddenly we appeared.. Ms. Eve is as wily as a wolf isn't she? She must have thought Reynolds's scheme was ridiculous, but when we showed up she started thinking it might be true.. but it wouldn't be smart to just ask him directly.. so what would she do? Such useful people were right there in front of her..”

“Stop, stop..”

Holo halted him like an elderly woman, then laughed. Following his logic, Reynolds must have believed Eve was somewhat interested. That would explain why his attitude changed when Cole asked him if he had actually found the bones.

He probably thought it would be unprofessional to ask her himself, so he probably offered them a meal to determine whether Lawrence was her messenger. And he wasn't, he was

effectively being used by Eve. As such, he didn't have to say anything important. He could just end their conversation with a meal, like skillfully carving up a fattened goat.

“So, what will you do?”

Holo's question to Lawrence was to-the-point. Her amber eyes seemed redder than usual. D'Jean's was a disappointingly poor company, but Holo was wrathful when she considered that they were still searching for the bones. She was surely thinking “this time I must take action.. my fangs, claws and mind will resolve this, I will not simply let it go.” As her partner, Lawrence made up his mind.

“I've decided.”

He was about to continue, but noticed two more eyes coldly staring at him. Cole remained silent, but he surely felt the same way Holo did.

“We'll investigate this, even if we end up with nothing.”

This wasn't just one person's business trip.. it wasn't even just a simple traveling contract between two. A decision reached by consensus was always the most satisfying kind.

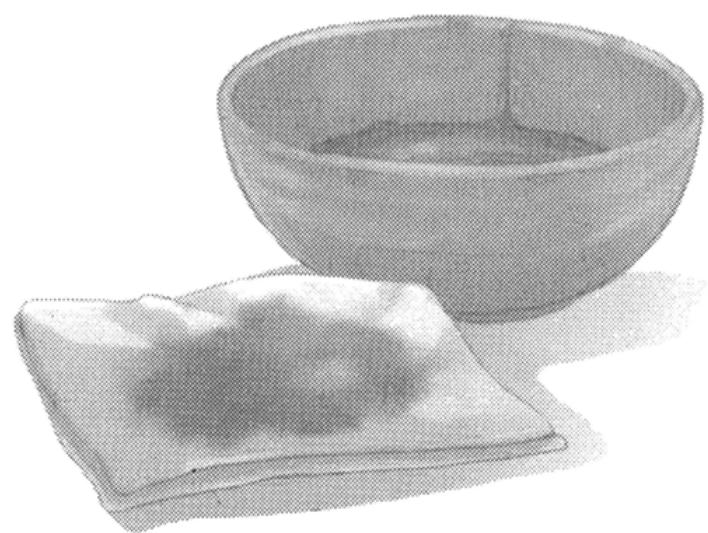
They weren't an army, but they were a bit like a noble's knights. However, people would grow tired of carrying such weights. Holo had carried the weight of an entire village on her shoulders, so she knew this pain well. And Lawrence was never even thanked.

Thinking in these terms, it dawned on him that the only thing he could really do for Holo was cheer for her when she cried or felt depressed. He stopped smiling, took a deep breath, and assumed the role of a military commander.

“Now, I shall announce each of our responsibilities.”

They listened to Lawrence, Cole taking it seriously and Holo pretending to.

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Chapter 3

After Lawrence settled the extra fees Holo had racked up on wine, he left the inn and discovered her and Cole trying to step on each others' feet. Cole stopped as soon as he saw Lawrence, giving Holo the chance to land a step.

"I win."

Cole faced her with a humble expression of defeat as she proudly stood tall. Lawrence honestly couldn't tell which of them was the real child. But he'd heard that as people aged they became more childish, so maybe this was normal.

"Alright."

Holo and Cole were nearly the same height, and they played together happily like twins. When Lawrence spoke, they turned to face him at the same time.

"So, do you remember your missions?"

"Yes."

"Mmhm."

Cole beat her to the punch. An image of him studying in Akent, the city of learning, entered Lawrence's mind. Holo gave a fearless yawn as if to declare her impatience, but Cole continued.

"But this is making my heart beat faster."

"That's fine.. my advice is to not think of it as lying. Considering that you can make it come true, in that case it won't be a lie anymore, will it?"

Lawrence spoke in part to ease Cole's conscience.. even though he was smiling the boy was still plainly nervous.

"Mmhm.. it- it's alright. I'll gather as much information as I can."

He gathered his courage and replied, like a knight preparing for his first battle. Lawrence smacked him on the back in encouragement before continuing.

"I look forward to your results."

Lawrence believed Cole would grow if he was given an important mission. He wasn't just a kid wandering around Akent with a stone tablet, all covered in chalk. He had experienced what it was to be cheated and to be expelled. He also knew what it was like to live in poverty. Lawrence wasn't lying when he said he was looking forward to Cole's results.

"Then, I'll see you later tonight."

"Of course."

Cole's face was different from the one he wore while playing with Holo. He seemed energized as he left them. Despite his small size, they could still feel his determination. Lawrence didn't have the time to wonder if that was how he looked when he was Cole's age, because at that moment someone grabbed his sleeve. At least it wasn't a prostitute, but in a way it was worse: it was Holo.

"Let us go."

"Ah.. ahhh!"

Holo walked briskly, and when he didn't immediately follow she turned back to him making a noise of confusion.

"Hmm?"

He sighed in his heart and began walking. If she loved Cole, why did she put him to task like this? Did she simply think that highly of him? Lawrence liked Cole, but he wasn't sure to what extent he could trust him.

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"Will you be alright on your own?"

Holo and Lawrence boarded a ferry that would take them from one part of the delta to the next, closer to the south side of Gerube. It was pointless for the three of them to move together, so they had opted to split apart and collect information separately.

Cole would blend in with the northern beggars and ask them for information about D'Jean Company. Holo would go to the Church on the south side, acting as a nun traveling north, and request information about the Church's influence further north along the Roef and Rome rivers. Lawrence would head to the branch of Ron's Company on the delta and inquire about D'Jean's activities relating to the wolf-god's bones.

Since Holo and Cole were smarter than Lawrence, he knew he didn't have cause to worry. But Holo was a wolf-god herself, ears and tail included, and she was basically spying on her enemies. She may be the most intelligent of the bunch, but he still couldn't put his mind at ease when he considered her doing it alone.

"I really think I ought to join you--"

Holo, who was weaving her way through the crowded ferry with him in tow, turned around and looked him in the eyes.

"So you feel Cole can work independently but I cannot? Am I just some pathetic girl who cannot even gather information!?"

Her eyes narrowed menacingly; the red of her irises deepened. He could see the pier beyond her, and it was even more crowded than the one for boats heading to the north.

"Well no.."

"Then what is it?"

His concerns were really just excuses, so of course she had cause to be angry.

"Sorry."

She punched his chest just as he apologized.

"Foolish mule."

"..?"

She shot him an even angrier stare before turning away. There was nothing for him to do except massage his chest. A few moments passed before she turned back to him.

"You truly are stupid when it comes to politics."

"P- politics?"

"Truly, so very stupid."

Once again, he was on the receiving end of her criticism. He could only scratch his head.

"I simply do not understand why you would prevent me from acting on my own in this

situation.”

Lawrence was still puzzled.

“Well, it's just that if anything happens-”

“Even Cole could suffer an accident. You are truly.. ah, argh!!”

After voicing her frustration, she straightened her back. Her face revealed that she was about to say something embarrassing. She turned her eyes from the river back to Lawrence. She seemed to be scolding him.. but when he searched his memories he realized that she was doing so to cover up her own embarrassment.

“As our captain, you are the one waiting for information; Cole and I are your soldiers. As such, letting us compete with each other means you will be the one holding the reigns, does it not?”

As the ferry approached its destination, Lawrence looked out at the other boats on the water. He was finally beginning to understand Holo's perspective.

“Because you both want to complete your job and be rewarded, huh?”

He was right; Holo turned away from him in embarrassment. The truth was, if she did better than Cole, Lawrence would reward her. If she didn't, he would comfort her. But if he helped her, he would be robbing her of those possibilities and both would go to Cole.

It made sense, but something was missing.. why didn't she put on an act? Why would she reveal this to him, even if it was so embarrassing?

The ferry had finally arrived at it's pier, but they would have to wait – the pier was simply too crowded. Because of the crowds, Holo would have to closely control her ears and tail, so she spoke in an even tone to calm down.

“If you are to open your own shop, you must learn how to manage others.”

“Oh!!”

Lawrence hastily covered his mouth after his reaction. She was right.. he had to learn how to be the boss. Be it honestly or manipulatively, he would have to sway their hearts. He would need to win their loyalty. He was used to doing that on a one-on-one basis, but not when there were more people involved.

“With your current lack of skill, you cannot even handle *me*.”

Holo put one hand on her waist, tilting her head in a demeaning gesture as if he was nothing. He glanced around before counter-attacking.

“But that's what you find attractive, isn't it?”

He kept a straight face, but her own expression didn't soften; she stood her ground.

“Maybe a little.”

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“Alright, then I'll leave you to it.”

“Your face betrays how worried you truly are.. but I shall listen to your words instead.”

They were at the next pier, the one that would lead Holo off the delta, and onto the southern district of Gerube. Lawrence made a deal with the ferry operator, and paid Holo's fees in advance.

“I want to eat white bread tonight.”

“If you do a good job.”

She smiled in response, then jumped aboard the ferry to cross the last leg of the river. The Church never came to the north side, revealing that it was considered pagan territory, while the south side was entirely ruled by the Church.

Historically, the reason for this was that religious merchants had come from southern regions and bought the land of the south side of the city. The two districts were totally different.. some people even called Gerube a miniature model of the world. Of course, that was an exaggeration.

Building heights and road widths varied on the north side, but they were strictly regulated on the south side. He wouldn't find any mules yawning lazily in the loading areas here like D'Jean Company.

It hadn't been clearly visible from the north, but Lawrence could now see the large bell of the church. It was a display of opulence intended to convey the lesson that only those who were generous would be able to pass the gates of heaven. It sat atop the highest tower – the place nearest to God.

Holo would act like a nun who wished to return to her hometown in the north, but was concerned that it was still under pagan influence. Under this pretense she could pry for information. Lawrence had warned her not to pry too recklessly, but even if he hadn't done so he was confident that her keen mind would have no trouble completing her task.

Now that they were acting as a team, gathering information and making sense of it, he felt strange to leave her on her own. He knew it was something he would have to grow accustomed to, if he wanted to operate his own shop.. but it only made him wonder if Holo would still be with him when that time came.

“..”

He scratched his head and sighed. Holo would surely chastise him for worrying about this, and say “I just cannot leave you, can I?” He smiled as he watched her melt into the crowd aboard the ferry. He then spun around and began his trek to the Rowen Trading Guild branch that was on the delta.

He hadn't planned on joining Holo to the south side; he didn't know anyone in that district anyhow. But the delta market was a key trading hub connecting the north and the south – each company had a branch there to collect information.

Because of the restricted space to build on, they couldn't just construct more buildings to expand their influence like they could in other towns. Still, they made sure their buildings were distinct to help people know who they were dealing with. Lawrence was even experienced enough to distinguish which company ultimately owned which building.

Each company had tens, even hundreds of competing merchants in their employ. It dazzled Lawrence to consider that no matter how many kinds of businesses he had come across, there were so many more that he had yet to discover.

He knocked lightly on a door that looked similar to the kind one would find on the cabin of a large ship.

“Oh? Who's this unfamiliar face?”

Several people were on the first floor, all dressed in traveling grab.

“Long time no see, Mr. Keeman.”

Typically, the owner of a company sat behind the bar on the first floor, facing the building entrance. A man named Keeman occupied that spot here, displaying his beautiful golden hair. He was the son of a trader from an important city of commerce.



Lawrence had heard that his father was a top-tier merchant, and that because of his father's reputation Keeman was able to have seen any goods imaginable without leaving town. Lawrence had no idea whether to take this as good-natured humor, sarcasm or hatred.

Instead, Keeman was actually as thin as a bard. Unlike the other merchants gathered on the first floor to exchange news, his face wasn't frostbitten. A person from a wealthy family would usually be despised by merchants, but Keeman was deeply trusted.

He might be two years younger than Lawrence, but unlike Lawrence he knew the ins and outs of every kind of business taking place in Gerube. City merchants in guilds didn't need skills like walking days on end or speaking other languages to make deals with foreigners. Keeman was the type who was trusted by traveling merchants to care for their home while they were gone.

"Long time no see indeed, Mr. Kraft Lawrence. I take it you've arrived by land this time?"

There weren't any ships coming in from the sea for the past few days.

"No, actually.. I arrived on a boat, but it wasn't by sea, it was down the river."

Keeman scratched his chin with the quill pen in response as his eyes lolled around. This man's brain stored thousands of maps with it, so he could probably guess the part Lawrence took to do his trade.. even if they had only met twice.

"I didn't take a normal route, you see. I had other business to take care in Lenos."

"Ah, I see.."

Keeman's smile was even more subtly nuanced than Holo's. Town merchants lived in one place for decades. They knew each other well, but still mentally sparred with one another. They were far more cunning than a traveling merchant, and such a young branch manager was bound to have all kinds of hidden talents.

Lawrence was struggling to stay calm, so he pulled out the silver coins he planned to donate to the Rowen Trading Guild.

"By the way, I just watched a fine play at the Stream of Gold."

"Ho ho.. a fine play, huh? Mr. Lawrence, you're quite the merchant. Not many would see through that."

Keeman didn't even look at the coins. He was smiling like a kid exchanging secrets.

“Even obvious actions can be poisonous. And the manager of the branch, Mr. Gideon, is out right now, probably working to protect our wallets.”

Lawrence had only ever heard of Gideon, who oversaw the various branches of the Rowen Trading Guild in Gerube. He could even be one of the merchants who was using Eve.

This implied that, since she arrived in Gerube, the guildless Eve was up against them all on her own. And Lawrence would have to fend for himself.

Any man would grow excited by the story of a young knight's battle with a giant. But Lawrence wouldn't make his admiration obvious.. Keeman was simply too exceptional to trust like Eve.

“Poison, you say? I thought all the landowners in the north were fish without water.”

“Correct. Several decades ago they were washed ashore, and now they've dried out. And this year's northern expedition was canceled, so they have even less capital available to them. They'll do anything to solve their problems.”

Landowners had only one way to earn money; they had to levy a fee somehow, either by rent, or by some kind of market tax. With fewer people flowing through the market, there was less capital and tax revenues would decrease.

But since days long past, moneylenders were the ones who earned, while the borrowers were the ones who ended up bankrupt. A lender would always earn interest on whatever the borrower earned.

“By being generous now, they might earn a higher return later.. that's what a casual observer would be thinking, right?”

Keeman emotionlessly received Lawrence's donation, pulling out a ledger and recording the amount inside. When Lawrence visited his guild branch in Ruvineigen, Jakob the branch manager would always be delighted when he received a donation.. Lawrence really enjoyed such reactions.

“No.. we might indeed get a higher return as you say, but our opponents are the sons of people who paid interest right up until they died and who paid interest since they were born. And a decade ago, there was a war in the Winfield Channel so they couldn't make their interest payments for several years. Us southerners feel they've paid enough, so we offered to forgive the outstanding balance if they expanded the market.”

The golden-haired young trader was even able to control the type of laughter he was using. His bright smile seemed to hide venomous snakes behind it. He continued.

“But the landowners stood firm?”

“As you say. They said they want to honor the loan and repay it fully. It would be easy for us to make even more money if they expand the market. And they know that, so they're standing firm and telling us that they can't just stand by while we earn more and more profit.”

Keeman shrugged, obviously not knowing what else to say. Lawrence was taken aback.. if this was true then Eve was in a really bad situation. Even if she was from a declined line of nobles, and was influential along the Roam river, she was giving it all up to go to the south. It was *that* bad. She must have borrowed as much as she could from the powerful figures in town, and now she couldn't even gradually pay them back.

“If they could be convinced to be reasonable, things wouldn't be so bad. All of this has made it tough for people to move between the north and south sides of town.. they can't even marry someone from the other district.”

Keeman revealed these things to Lawrence, but it wasn't a gesture of friendship. He must have assumed that Lawrence, a guild member, had just casually mentioned the meeting at the Stream of Gold to make conversation.. but if Lawrence abused his status as a guild member to collect information or spread rumors, it could spell trouble for them all.

As such, Keeman was also implicitly warning him that if he went against the guild's interests, he would be punished. Those who didn't understand the motivation behind such warnings would feel threatened, as if they were being kept on a leash. But eventually they'd realize that the guild was acting in their mutual interest as well; a guild looked out for it's members, after all.

“I see. Then I guess that rumor I heard wasn't just hearsay?”

“Which rumor?”

To Keeman, information was of paramount importance.. so Lawrence found himself smiling when Keeman struck a pose that revealed how much more interesting this was to him than the five coins Lawrence had donated. Such a gesture would have been hilarious if Keeman were just another traveling merchant.

“Well, the one that D'Jean Company is being used as bait by the northern rulers.”

Lawrence was only guessing, but that changed to conviction when Keeman's expression didn't change.

“What? Sorry, but who told you something like that?”

It seemed that Keeman realized that Lawrence saw through his act. It was time to chose words carefully; Lawrence decided to throw a large rock in the pond.

“Actually, there's this guy I traded with in Lenos.. this strange merchant who called himself a noble-”

Lawrence was cut off by Keeman tugging his sleeve. Though his face stared at Lawrence as if he was telling a joke, the rest of his body was saying something else entirely.

“Mr. Lawrence, you seem kinda tired. Why not take a break in my office?”

Obviously, this was a loaded sentence. Lawrence had unexpectedly landed a big fish.

“That would be nice.”

Lawrence flashed him an honest smile.

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They made their way to Keeman's office in the back of the guild, passing by a number of other important-looking offices. As they entered, someone came in and handed them each a bowl of fish soup. When it wasn't the time for alcohol, it was customary in Gerube to offer visitors a bowl of fish soup. As Lawrence sipped on the soup, the taste made him a bit nostalgic for the herring he always ate in the past.

“So? Tell me what relationship you have with the leader of the Boland family.”

It wasn't a question.. this was an interrogation. Keeman didn't so much as touch his bowl of soup. Lawrence even had a passing suspicion that the soup might have be poisoned.

“I'm a traveling peddler. Of course I'm not her dance partner in ballrooms.”

“The riot in Lenos was over the fur situation, correct?”

News of the riot should have just arrived today, unless someone quickly rode in on a fast horse the previous night. Lawrence nodded and coughed.

“We struck a rather large deal, but she flew the coop at the last minute. That's why I came here.. I'm vexed, and I want to lodge a complaint against her.”

“Pull the other one.”

Keeman was used to facetiousness, so he saw right through it.

“Well, I'm not joking about the deal. I'm chasing Ms. Eve down the river right now.. but my real goal is to consult her on a certain matter.”

“Something related to business?”

Lawrence shook his head.

“I've learned something.. inconceivable.. which has put my business on hold. I've come to investigate it.”

“Something.. inconceivable?”

“Correct.”

Keeman's eyes darted back and forth as though he processed this information.

“About the bones of the wolf-god?”

“Yes. Given how quickly you came to that conclusion, should I assume it's a popular topic in these parts?”

“Well, in a manner of speaking. Do you believe that rumor?”

Keeman wasn't shocked, but he was definitely surprised. He was surely wondering why Lawrence would be investigating that.

“Huh.. everyone's so surprised when I bring this up..”

“No no, I'm not..”

Keeman realized that pretending otherwise would be pointless.

“Sorry, I guess it's that obvious, huh? Yes, I'm truly surprised.”

“My companion's from the north, you see. When she learned such a rumor about her homeland, she grew obsessed with learning the truth at any cost.”

In an important town that mediated between the north and south, such conflicts between pagans and the Church would be common.. even popular. Such things were surely more intense

in a place like Gerube.

“I see.. but it's not your desire to investigate it that surprises me..”

His response started off in much the same way that Mr. Reynolds' had, but it continued differently.

“..it's that despite knowing Ms. Eve, you're using your connection with her to follow a lead like you're grasping at a cloud.”

Lawrence paused in consideration. Keeman's surprise made logical sense.

“In other words, if I take advantage of Eve, there are other, more important leads to follow?”

Keeman nodded in response.

“I brought you to my office because her name is very influential in town.”

“What do you mean?”

If her name held that much sway in Gerube, then there must be a very good reason. Lawrence felt there was only a fifty-fifty shot that Keeman would tell him why, but he won that gamble. Keeman coughed.

“She is using her status as a fallen noble to secretly make deals with members of the powerful elite here and there. She alone understands the network of relations between those people, so everyone knows not to cross her or it might stir up trouble in town. I've already implied this to you, and my warning still stands.”

He was of course referring to their earlier discussion about the northern and southern districts of Gerube. He wasn't speaking about his personal experiences, but rather where the guild stood in the grand scheme of things.

“Because of this, when I hear that you, Mr. Lawrence, aren't her business partner, but are just milking her for information about dumb rumors, I'm both relieved and surprised.”

Keeman spoke kindly, but he was making it perfectly clear that his warning was for Lawrence to not do business with Eve in this town.

“But it'll be fine to just get her thoughts on that rumor. No-one along the river should know more than she does.”

Keeman was conceding that it would be alright to investigate the matter of the wolf-god's bones; in fact, he was revealing that he didn't believe in the rumors.

"Incidentally.. what possessed you to try to strike deal with her? Many do business with Ms. Eve, but it's difficult to deal with her solitary disposition.. if you were able to catch her eye, then that means there's another way.."

Of course Keeman would be interested in that.. Eve was influential, so any company would want a chance to work with her.

"I didn't do anything special, she just happened to find me at the right time. I barely managed to see through her before it was too late."

"Really?"

"She placated the ruling class, used them to earn great profits without paying them back, and now she can't.. or she doesn't intend to. She's bargaining and competing with those southern misers that just met at the Stream of Gold."

Keeman was once again surprised. He raised his hand to his face before nodding.

"She cheated me in our own deal, involved my companion, and I nearly wound up dead.. she kept her knives hidden until the end. She was only trading with me because a traveling merchant like me is the only kind left for her to cheat. That's all it was."

Logically that would also explain why the Derrink Company agreed to loan them money when they needed quick capital to purchase fur.. she used the power of her name.

"Hmm. I see, that's convincing enough.. and yet.. even though she pointed her knives at you, you *still* have this kind of relationship with her.. I tip my hat to you."

Lawrence couldn't help but admire Keeman's eloquence. He smiled bitterly.

"Children who fought over a money-pouch are honest with each other.. even if they're not friends, they still share a kind of embarrassing relationship over that memory."

It wasn't the whole truth, but it was close enough. Keeman closed his eyes and nodded, putting his index finger against his temple as if thinking it over. Those who owned their own company hadn't necessarily engaged in such brutal trades before.

"I understand. Incidentally.."

“Hmm?”

Lawrence was caught off-guard by Keeman's next question.

“Who are you siding with, Mr. Lawrence? The guild, or Eve Boland?”

The only word to describe Lawrence's state right now was “nervous.” For an instant, his mind went blank and he couldn't even remember who he was speaking with. But it wasn't because he was surprised by the question, but rather the look on Keeman's face.

A cold sweat broke out on Lawrence's back. It seemed that casually chatting about Eve like had turned out to be a grave error.. Keeman wasn't after news, he was manipulating Lawrence.

“Um, the guild, of course..”

When he finally replied, Keeman didn't nod. He looked away from Lawrence with the same cold attitude he had shown him when Lawrence donated earlier. Lawrence was trapped.. hoist by his own petard.

“Then I expect that you, as a member of the guild, will act so as to not damage our reputation. Her social circle is like property.. like capital. And big business relies on such capital.”

Keeman smiled happily. His tone was steady, but aggressive. Lawrence felt idiotic for dropping his guard and incorrectly judging Eve's importance to the guild. Now he was cornered into pledging his assistance.. it was like signing a contract of unknown content. There was no way he could be comfortable about this. But it seemed he wasn't the only one.

“Eve's in trouble. She's worried right now.”

Keeman continued smiling while he continued casually chatting about Eve. He wasn't saying this to bargain with Lawrence.. it was too trivial, too useless. Lawrence knew that he had to determine some clue as to what the guild had in store for him, no matter how desperate it made him look. He needed to figure out how they planned to use him. But just as he was about to ask..

“Mr. Keeman! Vice president!”

Shouting was followed by worried footsteps, then Keeman's door was pounded on fiercely and his name called loudly and nervously. But Keeman maintained his composure, and sipped on his now-cold soup.

“It seems my attention is needed elsewhere. Excuse me.”

He rose from his chair and calmly walked to the door. Lawrence had missed his chance to ask. He could only stare at Keeman, who suddenly stopped and turned back to him.

“By the way.”

His manner was like an actor who could confidently play any part that was demanded of him.

“Should you reveal any of this conversation to others..”

He opened the door and listened to the staff member before nodding. Humans didn't have a wolf's ears or tail, but some were still perfectly capable of competing with the gods and nymphs. Lawrence was profoundly hit by that realization.

“..you'll live to regret it.”

After Keeman finished his sentence, his expression reverted to his happy trader's face.

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The guild was as busy as a beehive. Several people ran inside, dropped letters off at the bar, and ran back out. Company offices like this were the best place to exchange news about what was going on in a city, but Lawrence didn't notice what was going on.. he was too busy replaying the conversation he just had with Keeman in his mind. Keeman was good.

Lawrence's face was no less calm than those of the other guild members, who were all trying to make sense of what was going on.. but he was gravely worried. Keeman was going to take advantage of his relationship with Eve. Lawrence had intended to use Eve as an ice-breaker, to pry information out of Keeman. And it had completely backfired.

When Lawrence finally noticed that the atmosphere in the guild had changed, he raised his head and spotted a familiar face approaching him. It was Holo.. hadn't they agreed to meet back at the inn after finishing their tasks?

“How may I help you?”

A merchant by the front door politely asked, mistaking her for a nun confused by the situation. She seemed to be considering how to answer before she noticed Lawrence stand up.

“I beg your pardon, she's with me.”

There were many traveling merchants who tended to the needs of knights and mercenaries, so

it wasn't surprising for one to be particularly rich, be treated by Keeman as a VIP, or even have a nun in tow. As Lawrence reported his name, the others were surely thinking of him as such.. some might even be admiring him as someone who could earn such profits. But Keeman's face was different.

Lawrence let his back receive their stares and walked Holo outside. The streets still looked the same as before, but upon closer inspection one could see merchants and their apprentices rushing between people and buildings to deliver messages.

“What happened?”

Lawrence walked with Holo through the crowded as he questioned her.

“The town suddenly destabilized.. how could I leave you alone?”

His first instinct was to snappishly ask her what that meant. But that wasn't fair, since it seemed like he was always doomed to get swept up into such incidents. Even now he was undoubtedly caught in yet another one.

“So did you manage to get any useful information?”

He was using all of his effort to remain calm. He expected Holo to proudly stand tall, but she slouched and shook her head.

“Barely anything. Being so much lovelier than you, I was planning to get as many details as I could. But because of this mess, I was thrown out. What is going on?”

He ignored her question, unsure how to answer.. he was far more concerned about what she had said.

“Thrown out? By the Church?”

“Indeed. I wonder if there is a demon threatening the Church in town..”

She spoke gravely, and with such a straight face that it made Lawrence laugh out loud.

“That would certainly be terrible.. did something happen at the Church?”

“Well, after I was expelled I tried to investigate.. but a crowd arrived and made it impossible. Some were even carrying lances and sabers.”

“Soldiers?”

“It seemed so. I suspect they are bringing something important from the river to the Church. It is quite an event.. even that lovely boy who competed with you for my hand in marriage was there.”

“That guy from Kumersun?”

His face darkened, his expression clearly stating “don't mention something I hate so much.” Holo laughed. Even if a similar incident like that was to happen, it wouldn't spiral out of control this time. But Holo and Lawrence had grown closer as they went through that ordeal, so Lawrence could understand why she would happily bring it up.

“But I wonder what happened? That's not your everyday incident.”

“I've no idea. My eavesdropping yielded nothing, so I decided to regroup with you.”

“I see.”

Lawrence tried to reconcile Holo's information with what he just learned at the guild.

“From what I gathered at my guild, it's as though a boat from the north was towed along by another boat from a southern company. I figured it was a political issue.”

Holo's face contorted in confusion – he was being too subtle.

“Well, the north and south sides of town are in conflict, but they can't just draw a border on the river. If fish migrate north, only the north would be able to fish, and vice versa. It's kind of like when people go to fish, they always compete for the best spot. A fisherman from the south won't just admire the shape of a northern boat and yield the spot.”

Holo slowly nodded; it seemed his analogy was doing the trick.

“They're towing a boat from the north and delivering something that has to be guarded by soldiers.. and they're delivering it not to a company, but the Church.. huh.. did they catch a mermaid or something?”

“A mermaid?”

Holo's was unexpectedly puzzled. It seemed she had never heard of mermaids.

“Hmm.. how should I describe them? Well, they're mythical creatures. The part of the sea near here is the Winfield Channel, you see, and the northern exit to the channel is so rocky that

there are always shipwrecks. Since ancient times the myth is that there are maidens with beautiful voices there to distract the sailors. At first the sailor is puzzled upon seeing a pretty girl on the sea, but soon they see that the lower half of her body isn't human, but fish-like."

Holo's admiration was plainly written on her face. She knew of the sea, but not this myth. If even she hadn't heard of it, then it was probably just a silly superstition. As Lawrence came to that conclusion he saw her hum and nod.

"Human males are always being seduced, are they not?"

It was said that all mythical creatures beguiled humans, but Lawrence had been arguing with Holo long enough to know that they could still be reasoned with.

"Compared to that kind of tough life of always avoiding beguilement, I prefer leading a relaxed life."

He said this knowing that Holo's character was to prefer being under the sun to being in a casino. In response, she waved her ears and answered in embarrassment.

"Quite right. I love wine as well. However--"

She smiled before continuing.

"Have you prayed to god? Perhaps by not falling in one trap, you will fall in another."

"Huh?"

"I am asking if you are hiding something from me."

"Ah."

He groaned in realization that he still wasn't able to hide anything from her. After thinking it through, he explained what had happened between him and Keeman. Her reply was obvious.

"Foolish mule."

Despite wanting to plead that Keeman wasn't a normal person, he swallowed his pride and realized it would barely qualify as an excuse. But her next words confused him.

"Still, it will be alright if you refuse anything unreasonable, right?"

She had an uncanny ability to seem as though her reasoning was the whole truth.. it was

difficult to bear. He forced himself to focus and scratched his head. Merchants normally signed paper contracts, but a verbal contract carried a lot of weight as well.

“The Rowen guild has hundreds of merchants. Some are big shots who earn thousands of gold coins annually.. I'm just a feather on the wind, I can't refuse their orders. It's indeed stupid, but it's what keeps the guild united.”

Even when he had been on the verge of bankruptcy in Ruvinsheigen, and was faced with a life of slavery on a ship or in a mine, he didn't betray his guild. It was like a good friend, but also like a terrible enemy.. like a group of knights armed with money and quill pens.

“Indeed. The small potatoes in a regiment cannot disobey their captain.”

“You think so, huh?”

“Mmhm. But in their situation they stand to lose much. Since you know that fox, they may wish to do something to you.. and yet they only threaten you to not cooperate with others.”

One's mind might be clouded when considering such a problem, but another observer would judge more calmly.

“On the other hand, it is a basic tactic for leaders to threaten their followers into order. There is no reason for you to fret overmuch.”

Given that she had once been the harvest god of a village, Holo's words were quite convincing. Even if she was also a girl who loved food and wine, and cried when she remembered her home.

“At any rate, I simply move in accordance with the priorities of my heart.”

She waved her hand and increased her pace, leaving Lawrence behind. It would be wrong to get angry at her capricious ruthlessness, but simply smiling in response wasn't enough. He replied to her back as she moved away.

“And if it's first priority happens to be me, you'll never admit it, huh?”

She stopped and turned around.

“Hmph. It cannot be captivated by you.”

Her evil smile appeared, complete with fangs. He shivered, worried about whether anyone noticed. The coldness he felt on his back right now was surely not due to it getting colder

outside, but due to his own temperate rising. He sighed as he caught up with her and captured her hand.

“Had enough? Then let's go find Cole.”

As she spun to face him, her expression was just as he expected: angry.

“That is *my* line, you fool!”

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Luckily the fee to be ferried back to the north was only half the cost of going the other way. If anything was going to happen in town, it would spread quickly, and if it was happening on the south side then people would be heading there out of interest.

In fact, that was happening now – the boats heading north were almost empty. Lawrence was able to haggle the price down unlike when they headed to the south, and what he saved he spent to buy Holo some more clam meat.

“Just keep it a secret from Cole.”

Holo had already finished devouring them by the time he finished speaking.

It might seem best to stay on the delta or go south if one wanted to investigate the situation in town, but given what Holo had told him Lawrence suspected there were even better avenues.

He hadn't told Keeman where they were staying in town, so he had some leeway. Keeman might have his suspicions, but it wouldn't be enough to act decisively. But if Cole had been caught, Lawrence would have no choice but to follow Keeman's orders.

“Ah.. you're back..”

Cole had an odd look on his face, causing Lawrence to wonder if something happened to the boy. But when he noticed the smoked herring and a coin the table, he understood the situation. Cole had asked for information by pretending to be a beggar, and had won their hearts.

“..so tired..”

“I know. But it looks like you've gathered a lot of information, haven't you?”



Holo moved up to Cole, who smiled in exhaustion. She massaged his eyes. Holo had fooled Lawrence before with such an innocent, sleepy face.. but right now it was melting her own seriousness.

“Um.. right.. I did. D'Jean Company is hoarding food, so the food supply in town is dwindling.. it's getting tough to find enough.”

“And they're selling eggs in the market to offset that recklessness, right?”

Holo rubbed Cole's face as she stared off into the distance.

“It sounds like they are preparing quite a feast..”

“Maybe. If so, Reynolds is dead serious about the bones.”

Maybe this was his last-ditch effort? Based on what Keeman had told Lawrence, Eve negotiated with those who stood to gain the most from this situation. In this kind of endeavor, no one would approach her without having an obvious goal in mind.. and it would be a risky gamble to let others in on something like this.

It was reasonable to think that if Reynolds was helping Eve then he knew who had the bone, but couldn't contact them without a mediator. That meant they were probably a famous noble or clergyman, who wouldn't trade with just any merchant.. just those who were nobles or could at least afford a noble's name.

Holo seemed to have an idea.

“This seems to match a rumor I heard.”

“What's that?”

“Recently the church of a certain village, which caused a certain mess, has been bravely spreading the teachings of the Church. This has encouraged the believers around the river, and has begun to threaten the power bases of the other religions in the area around the northern mountains. It has stirred the fighting spirit of the believers to rally against the others.”

Cole rose to his feet and stared at Holo. She was implying that even his own home must be involved and would fall into the clutches of the Church.

“However, the people of the north were too strong, and their beliefs did not take root. You must bear that in mind, and not yield to the incorrect judgments of your relatives who suspect the path you have chosen.”

After hearing this Cole breathed in deeply and his shoulders drooped. Of course Holo knew that the Church could now easily show them “proof” that was beyond doubt. She was only hiding that behind a smile, since no one wanted to hear such things about their home.

“But the clergy will never allow those rebelling to get the better of them, so they’ll merely expose something so very near to the truth that it will be beyond suspicion. That would explain why the church in Lenos is trying to set up a bishopric.. after they find the bones, someone with such authority couldn’t be disobeyed or suspected.”

“Indeed. In order to convince the others that their beliefs are wrong, the Church must acquire the bones as soon as possible.”

Holo sighed and took a seat, her tail nearly emerging from under her robe. Lawrence watched her quietly before sighing as well.

“Then it must be true that D’Jean Company is still after the bones, and that they know where they are. They may have even told the Church already.”

“If so, we must go to the company and see for ourselves.”

Holo’s eyes were always dreadful when she stared at someone with her fangs exposed like this, but Lawrence just shook his head.

“We mustn’t solve this with violence. The Church won’t let you escape if you appear. Once they hear that the god of another religion exists, all who follow the ‘true’ faith will become hostile.”

Of course Holo wasn’t a child that would reply by saying “I’ll tear them to shreds if they do.” She understood the gulf in power between them. She knew that such violence would only give the stagnant Church the authority they needed to have a resurgence.

“If we can, we should steal some money. With money, we-”

“That is *not* funny-”

Holo had interjected, but when she saw that his eyes were serious she trailed off.

“With money, we can kill whomever we need to. With enough of it, we could even safely expose your home to others. It is *not* a joke.”

He was a merchant, and he knew how cheap a life was in the face of money. He knew just how cold and hard cash was, and just how much power it held. But he couldn’t tell if Holo was

buying it or not.. she just whispered to herself and looked away from him. He pressed on.

“Besides, just knowing the details isn't enough to make the situation any better.”

“And why not? If the company is trying to get that fox on their side, we have two options.”

“Two?”

The Wisewolf's mind was in full swing. She turned to look at Lawrence while knocking on Cole's head, then spoke.

“Cole's knowledge might be able to threaten that company.”

“I see.”

It was true, they could take advantage of the copper coin fiasco with D'Jean company.

“And what's their other option?”

She slung a strange smile on her face and rushed up to him. He felt a pit form in his stomach, the same kind of sinking feeling he got when he knew bad things were coming – he had seen her wear this kind of look before.

“If the company wishes the help of that fox, they can tell her the location of the wolf's bones.”

She was a head shorter than Lawrence, and standing in front of him like that would force her to look up to him. But it only gave the illusion that his was the stronger position.

“For D'Jean's, that's a possibility. But aren't you forgetting something?”

“What?”

Did she have have some secret in mind to blackmail Eve? He couldn't think of anything.

“Just think about it. For Eve, there's no benefit in telling us. If we ask her about the location, she'll just warn us to not get involved. Why should she tell us?”

Holo's reply was a even more provocative smile. Her tail swishing around unpleasantly.

“Then beguile her. You have already beguiled me, so she will be far less of a challenge.”

Love was more valuable than other kinds of trade, and Holo was aware of Lawrence's abilities.



Setting aside whether it would work, it was indeed a possibility. But why was Holo being so unpleasant about this? As his fear of her smile grew, she turned to Cole.

“Little one, stare at the ground and cover your ears.”

“Huh?”

Cole hesitated for a moment, but was soon overpowered by her stare. When he obeyed, she sighed and turned her attention back to Lawrence. Lawrence was at a loss.. should he apologize for not being as quick as Cole?

“Did you think I would not realize?”

Her smile vanished as she grabbed his ear and yanked him toward her.

“Wh- what-”

“*You* may have to watch others to know what they have eaten, but I simply need to smell it. And if I need more detail, I merely need a closer whiff.”

A closer smell.. Holo must be talking about earlier when Eve was consoling him. But why wasn't she angry until now? Lawrence felt strangely about it; he recalled trying to fool Holo earlier, but what was all of this about her smelling something?

“Oh!”

When he snapped out of it, her face was right in front of his.

“You are not an entirely brainless male. That spares me having to teach you the stupidity of being so brave.”

Eve had drunk some of his beer at the Stream of Gold. Such sharing was normal for travelers, so a merchant would think nothing of it. But Holo didn't see it that way.

“Don't misunderstand!”

After his firm statement, Holo violently removed her hand from his ear and replied.

“Of *course* I understand. You cannot keep any secrets from me.”

His ears weren't in that much pain, but he still massaged them while wincing. It was nice that she spoke her mind so honestly, but why did she have to grab his ears like that?

In spite of her resolve, and the fact that it might be possible, Lawrence still wanted to prioritize it last on their list of options. He wasn't confident that he could make it work.

As he watched Holo pull Cole up from the table, it dawned on him that she was worried. The myth of the bones was very much true.. that was becoming more and more obvious.

“Anyhow, we should now..”

Her powerful voice snapped Lawrence back to reality. Cole was tidying the table at her behest. But what were they going to do? He pondered over this until he noticed that Holo was holding a wallet – his wallet. She must have stolen it from him a moment ago.

“Buck up. You still wish to train the little one, do you not? Or would you prefer continuing to beguile Eve?”

Lawrence had no response besides shrugging and sighing.

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Only the best companies could afford glass windows. The well-to-do buildings usually settled for oiled parchment instead, but most people had no covering - just shutters. As such, most people had to open their windows to let light into their rooms.

Of course that included the room they were in now. Noise and cold air flowed into the room freely, but they didn't take any notice. They weren't ignoring it because they were hot, but because they were deep in thought.

“It's impossible..”

Lawrence finally broke their stalemate. His eyes were moving constantly as he tried to find a solution. But the atmosphere around the table didn't change.

“Hmm.. a logically troublesome foe.”

Currency-exchange fraud was done by using the rates from hundreds of different coinages and goods, and worked over long time periods. Of course there were fraud schemes that leveraged simple tricks, but then the fraudster had to be very skilled. The simplicity of this scheme was surprising to Lawrence.

“Um, I forgot the exact number, but if they do it that way they'll still have to make adjustments. I think they could change the number of crates with coins from fifty-seven to sixty..”

He looked over at Holo and Lawrence, who were shocked at his confidence.

“No, that must be it.. I see, this should slip by unnoticed..”

“Perhaps.. still..”

Holo moaned regretfully and pinched his face. Lawrence had discovered this scheme a long time ago, but he never suspected it was actually usable. Cole seemed to recognize that as well. Fifty-seven crates of coins always becoming sixty was quite strange.

There were two ways to fill a crate with columns of coins: in a rectangular grid, or a honeycomb pattern. Either way the coins would fill the crate, even if more coins fit into the crate in the honeycomb arrangement.

Contracts only stated that the crates had to be completely filled, not their precise arrangement. That made it easy to notice theft without having to count any coins or do a full inspection.

As such, the only party that had to really worry about counting the coins was the one who ordered them. No one else had to care about the actual number of coins inside each crate. One could ship fewer crates this way, and avoid paying shipping fees and tariffs.

“No one else has noticed it yet.”

“Hmm?”

“This young boy is smart. But smart people are everywhere.. perhaps one day you might even be one of them.”

Lawrence ignored her mockery. The boatman on the Roam river, Lacoza, shipped coins several times a year. In the past two years, someone who was aware of this scheme may have already opened the crates. And there was another important point to consider.

“The D'Jean Company may be saving on shipping fees and tariffs, but they'd soon come to realize the risks of using this method.”

“Eh? Ah.. the cargo manifests!”

Despite being pinched, the boy was still thinking logically. He understood, even if he was unable to smile. Holo pinched him even harder to show that he was correct.

“Exactly. The manifests cannot lie. And if they're suspected of scheming something, they would

be caught in a crate by crate inspection.”

But even if they were thoroughly investigated after the delivery, it might not yield any results. Lawrence picked up a coin on the table and sighed.

“Then..!”

Holo suddenly shouted, seemingly addicted to pinching poor Cole's face.

“We have a weapon we can use to threaten D'Jean's!”

Her eyes were shining, so Lawrence hesitated. He didn't know if telling her the truth was the best way to go, but a lie would cause him more suffering down the line.. she'd end up even more disappointed, or something even worse might happen.

“I'm sorry, but..”

Her face twisted.

“That's not going to help us.”

“Why not?”

The unpleasant look on her face was painful to behold.

“D'Jean Company is just evading taxes and shipping fees by using three fewer crates. If that gets out they may be fined, or lose a bit of reputation, but..”

“It is nothing compared to the profits they can get from the bones, right.. I remember you teaching me something like that when we bought these clothes..”

Editor's note: Basically, they can pack the crates differently and save on shipping/taxes by using 57 crates instead of 60, as long as they end up sending 60 to Winfield in the end. So they save on three crates' worth of taxes, since no one counts the coins, just the number of crates. If you're anything like me, this will seem like it's legal. Either this is just a red herring, or the author is stretching it a bit (because it should be perfectly legal for them to request 57 crates from Diva, then ship 60 to Winfield.. who cares?)

Holo grabbed her town-girl clothes, obviously dissatisfied but unable to reject the reality.

“Unfortunately so. It would have made a weapon if they were only partially interested in the wolf bones.”

Holo seemed disappointed at having seen something slip through her fingers, but it didn't depress her. Cole, who had provided her with this ammunition, seemed even more disappointed. He had obviously hoped his solution would help, but instead of another congratulatory pinch he was being bopped on the head, as though by an irritated older sister.

"Ah well. It does show that matters are serious. At least its better than if they were relaxed like buying apples."

"Indeed, if this will not work, we shall find another way."

It was easier said than done. It wasn't easy to find another myth like the bones of the wolf-god, so if Reynolds had a lead on where they were located, wouldn't it be best to follow it? And if Reynolds knew, then Keeman might as well – they were both based in Gerube, after all.

It was still unknown what Keeman was planning, but since he had asked Lawrence to contact Eve, it was likely that he would be compensated. The situation in town might make it hard to find Keeman quickly, but that seemed to be their best option.

But if anything were to happen..

"Also, we should consider that Eve isn't staying for much longer.. it seems she plans to leave this mess of a city behind, and may not return for a long time. What if Reynolds learns this?"

"We must contact her as soon as possible."

There was plenty of time left to make a true enemy out of Eve. As Lawrence muttered to himself, Holo continued speaking.

"So we must draw that fox in?"

Just who was it a moment ago that was so angry about Eve? Lawrence couldn't help but stare at Holo, but he had no choice now but to consider this stupid plan.

In this world, one had to jump at opportunities, because they never knocked twice. And if it was related to the Church, it would vanish into the darkness.

Holo played with Cole's hair while Lawrence stroked his beard. They considered many possibilities, and together it felt like the three of them could even outdo a genius strategist.

The time silently passed until Holo finally left Cole, walked to the bed, and let her tail out. Seeing this, Cole and Lawrence turned to look at each other. It seemed they were both

wondering whether she was requesting a break.. they smiled and nodded at each other.

“Hmm?”

Holo suddenly raised her head, turning her ears to the corridor.. just like she had earlier, when she played Lawrence for a fool. She undoubtedly heard footsteps; her sharp ears were beyond suspicion.

“Mr. Lawrence.. Mr. Kraft Lawrence.”

The innkeeper's voice called out as he knocked on their door. But why would he come to their room? They stayed silent, though Cole stood up and walked to the door. They had paid the deposit for their room, and hadn't broken any dishes. As Lawrence mulled it over, the door opened and the owner peeked into their room.

“Oh, you're here after all.”

“Yes, is there a problem?”

“Yes. Someone has asked me to pass something on to you.”

“Pass something on to me?”

Before Lawrence could guess what it was, the innkeeper handed him a letter. Lawrence proceeded to read the letter's fine handwriting.

“Come to the the Lidon Inn to the east. I wish to talk to you about my statues. The innkeeper knows the details.”

After finishing, Lawrence raised his head and found the innkeeper staring at the letter. After their eyes met, he nodded.

“You understand, right? One person.”

Lawrence didn't understand until he took another look at the letter and read the final line:
“One person.”

“Got it? Then I'll prepare a carriage. Please get ready.”

“Uh.. huh?”

Lawrence was mystified, but the owner simply looked at the floor and politely excused himself.

“What happened?”

“Hmm.. I've no idea.. I am to meet Eve at another inn.”

Lawrence set the letter down on the table. Holo regarded it as though it offended her territorial instincts, and hopped down off the bed.

“Something must have happened.. something complicated.”

“Will you be alright by yourself?”

Holo sniffed the letter as she held it with two fingers, as though divining some hidden information. As her expression twisted it became obvious that the letter was indeed from Eve.

“You *must* beguile her properly.. you fool!”

After barking this, she repeated herself.

“Will you be alright by yourself?”

The look on her face was stone serious.

“There are better ways to put me in danger, so I suspect this time she truly wishes to meet with me.”

“..”

Holo's silence made the depth of her displeasure obvious. Her tail swished about angrily. Was she worried that Lawrence was walking into a trap? Or did she just doubt he could properly play his role?

In any case, he had been summoned on his own and he planned to honor that request. Eve was the one to be suspected, not him. But he knew that pointing that out to Holo would only make her feel worse. To his credit, Cole came to Lawrence's rescue like some angelic figure.

“It's fine, Miss Holo. I'll still be here even if Mr. Lawrence leaves.”

He was certainly in fine form to make such a useful joke. Holo's eyes opened and she could only laugh in response.. there was no way she could capriciously follow up on that, since Cole was so much younger than Lawrence. When her laughter ceased, she put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“Alright, I shall await your return and be protected by young Cole.”

Lawrence looked at Cole, who smiled in response. In his heart, Lawrence thanked the boy.

“Very well, then I'll be off. When I'm gone, don't open the door for strangers.. it might be a wolf.”

Holo wasn't interested in his lame jokes.

“If there is bad news, I do not know if I will be able to remain in human form.”

She wasn't joking, she was asking. But Lawrence had no chance to answer. The innkeeper, who must have been well-paid by Eve, had very quickly managed to prepare a carriage and was already calling Lawrence downstairs.

“Then, the driver will take you the rest of the way.”

At this rate, he was beginning to suspect that the Lidon Inn wasn't an inn at all.. perhaps it was someone's residence. He nodded and followed the innkeeper outside.

It had proven to be clever to drag Cole along with them. Lawrence laughed to himself as he recalled the boy's face while he tried to come up with his joke.

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Upon leaving the inn Lawrence noticed a normal-looking black-topped horse carriage, and cautiously received his coat from the innkeeper. He understood that this was a secret meeting.. but he didn't understand how Eve had influenced the innkeeper to this degree. Inside the carriage, his suspicion only grew that he must have been bribed.

As the carriage neared the meeting place, Lawrence caught sight of many craftsmen and buildings blackened with age like the hideout Eve had taken Lawrence to earlier. Three workers were carving up a large pelt. Such textile work was much loathed by nobility, so this part of town was definitely not an upper-class residential area.

Upon arriving, Lawrence caught the stares of many of those craftsmen. It wasn't a surprise, given that new visitors to such a place were rare. But they weren't welcoming stares; Lawrence felt as though he was being monitored.

“I've brought the guest.”



The carriage had stopped next to a door, and the driver knocked on it without even getting off his seat. It was a rather rude gesture, but as Lawrence noticed the driver's knocking was irregular it became clear it was some form of password. When the door finally opened, a familiar face appeared.. it was one of the men who had been with Eve on the delta.

“Inside.”

The man uttered this short reply after verifying that the face he saw was indeed Lawrence. He then returned inside. Lawrence felt the dread of becoming involved in something suspiciously large-scale.. but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Being afraid would accomplish nothing, so Lawrence put on his merchant's demeanor and thanked the silent driver before disembarking. He pulled the door handle confidently and noticed that the door, while matching the disused appearance of the building, was made of good wood that didn't creak as he opened it.

Upon walking inside he noticed the man who had welcomed him standing against the wall. A merchant was always able to smile, and Lawrence was no exception. After receiving the smile, the man used the blade of his sword to point to the room at the end of the corridor and then closed his eyes.

The interior of the building was made of stone and wood, with a muddy floor that made it obvious that it had once been a factory. Lawrence was comforted by the warming smell of burning firewood as he walked to the door at the end of the corridor and opened it.

The room behind the door seemed to formerly be a studio bedroom, but was now little more than a storeroom. There was a number of wooden crates and buckets, and a fireplace by a table on the left.. finally some proof that someone might actually live there.

“Surprised?”

Eve, who was reading on a chair next to the table, raised her eyes. Her appearance resembled that of a noble reading a subject's letter. But when she raised her face it did indeed surprise Lawrence: the left side of her face was swollen.

“It's so cold.. close the door. It will not lock behind you.”

In fact, he was so surprised that it took a moment for it to register that she was joking. Her face didn't look downright terrible, but had clearly been on the receiving end of a solid punch.

“I'm sorry to disturb you.”

“..not at all, it's always a pleasure to be invited to the hideout of such a beauty.”

The joke was obvious, given how far it was from the truth.

“Hideout, huh? Well, have a seat. My apologies, but I've nothing to serve you.”

Lawrence sat on the chair she pointed at, setting down the letter she had sent him.

“It really *is* cold in here.”

Her left hand was on the table; she was certainly relying on the fireplace to read the papers. But she didn't reply, so Lawrence continued.

“Well, at least it will be nice and cool in the summertime.”

“But it's winter now!”

Hearing her cross answer, Lawrence flashed her a smile.

“I guess it's good in it's own way.. you'll feel warmer when you go outside.”

She raised her head once more, clearly feeling pain on her lips, and so smiling with her eyes.

“Oh ho. Indeed, I wouldn't mind that right now.”

“Then why are you staying indoors?”

Lawrence would have bluntly asked if she was imprisoned, but was concerned the guard on the other side of the door was eavesdropping. Eve sighed, and set down her reading material.

“You’re the kind who keeps their trump cards hidden, aren’t you?”

“..of course.”

Being of declined nobility and esteemed by big wigs like Keeman, Eve might actually be the sharpest weapon those landowners had in their arsenal. From his vantage point, Lawrence figured that Eve had been reading a contract of land exchange.. probably some kind of solitary battle briefing.

“I'm not here because of these contracts. I haven't asked you here to put you in danger.”

In Lenos, Eve had drawn Lawrence into a dangerous transaction. But at least for now she didn't

seem to be repeating history. Lawrence wasn't acting when his smile tightened.

"That's alright. I don't mind going to jail – I quite like hard and bitter bread."

Lawrence realized that the time for idle chat was over. It was time for business. What Eve meant was clear: her right cheek was about to receive a matching bruise from her captor.

"I've no dark motivation to call you here. But you *have* noticed the mess in the city right now?"

"Hmm.. you mean about the boat that just landed in the south side?"

"Yes. Quite the coincidence, that.. just as we were leaving the delta, too. Gerube's surrounded by a river, so it's problematic – it there's a mess, no one's allowed to cross the river and leave. And we'll be stuck here in the north, with our messengers trapped in the south."

Lawrence was a traveling merchant, so this wasn't a problem he had to face often. But it made it clear why Eve wanted to speak with him. He just didn't know if his information was worth anything to her. But his merchant's sixth-sense was telling him that he should cooperate.

"It seems like you get it. I want your information. You visited your guild in the south.. what did you hear?"

It seemed that Eve was aware of Lawrence's actions, but it wasn't really surprising. She knew he belonged to the Rowen Trade Guild, so it was natural that he would visit their local branch. But why would she ask him so plainly? Wasn't she afraid that they were being monitored? It seemed that she noticed his discomfort, so he continued.

"How much do you wanna know?"

"As much as possible."

Lawrence stared at the contracts on the table, debating whether he ought to keep anything secret. But after several seconds he raised his head, having decided to tell her everything.

"A boat from the northern side of the city was being towed by another from a southern company. I've no clue what was on it, but I heard that the sailors were resisting. It's probably something valuable to the Church."

He didn't hold back, and didn't follow up with a question.. Eve seemed completely thrown off.

"..is that a rumor?"

“It's what my partner learned at the Church.”

Eve sighed deeply at this revelation. She looked up at the ceiling and closed her eyes. A moment later, she turned back to Lawrence.

“I see.”

He wasn't lying, and she wanted to get all the information she could, so she didn't play around.

“I'm glad that you're not so narrow-minded a man as to hide the truth.”

“I'm just not some big shot who could avoid the kind of situation I'm in right now.”

“True, but there are many small, narrow paths a big shot can't enter in this world.”

It wasn't a good bet that Lawrence would know what was happening in the city, and Eve knew that he would get nothing out of it. So a secret meeting like this was probably her only option. But her words struck Lawrence.. she had taken that bet.

“And you're telling me to take these small, narrow paths?”

“You're in a unique position in this city. You have no real contacts, yet you're able to speak to the person they want the most.”

She smiled. Lawrence recalled Keeman, who also knew Eve, telling him the same thing earlier.

“It isn't useless. Or so I'm told by the one keeping me here, one who walks those so-called paths.”

She handed a contract to him. It was typical, complete with signatures and stamps.. written in an old hand and concerning the delta.

“I don't have the money, but I do have power through my connections. It'll prove useful in business.”

“But you're imprison-”

As he cut himself off, Eve's face became unreadable again.

“..it won't last.”

She touched her face, looking at her hand afterward as if expecting to see blood.



“You haven't yet asked about my wound.”

“What happened?”

His instant response made her cover her mouth and smile, while her shoulders trembled like a little girl lost in the city. She seemed both truly happy and pained at the same time.

“I lose.. it seems that no matter what I say, you always shoot back with the best response you can provide.”

“And you always draw me into danger.”

This was no idle conversation.. if they grew careless it could truly become dangerous.

“The danger I put myself into isn't the same as you, who plays it safe.”

“Indeed. I realized it when I talked to my partner.”

He replied defensively, conceding their verbal sparring match. Eve nodded, and changed her expression.

“It seems it might be true after all.. I'd heard that a fisherman in the north caught the Narwhale.”

“Narwhale...?!”

Lawrence immediately looked at the door after his outburst.

“Our guard won't eavesdrop.. he's paid too shabbily. And while my captor dares to punch me, he knows better than to do me any serious harm.”

Lawrence wasn't sure if he could trust her, but there wasn't anything he could do about it now. He nodded and continued their conversation.

“By Narwale, you mean that eternal life..?”

“Indeed. The horned sea-monster, who's meat extends life and who's powdered horn can cure any illness.”

Lawrence didn't believe in such a superstitious myth. Neither did Eve, apparently.

“Legend has it that the Narwhale can only survive in waters as cold as the icy far north.. why

would it come this far south?”

“According to a sailor, the weather of the northern seas is growing unstable and many creatures are starting to wander south. I've never heard of a real Narwhale, though. Maybe it's just the horn of a bison.”

There were just too many myths involving longevity serums and healing medicines. They were mostly pagan beliefs, but there were still those in the Church who believed in them as well. There were stories of an afterlife where people lived in a painless world free of disease, which wasn't possible in reality. Even if they lived by the teachings of God, people couldn't live forever.

Traveling merchants, who wandered far and wide to trade, and mercenaries, who always faced death and disease, all knew that these things were just superstitious myths.. but there were many who didn't understand that simple fact. Nobles tied to their lands their entire lives were the prime believers in such myths, always willing to pay a great deal for something like a Narwhale.

“But that means..”

“Exactly. If the Narwhale does exist, we are right back into the fire.”

Almost like a chair leg snapping, the situation had suddenly changed. In a city full of problems and anxiety, someone had caught something incredible that would stir up the situation entirely.. a war was imminent. At least, that's what Lawrence's instincts were telling him.

“The people in the south badly want control of the north.. if we move against them it could cause serious problems. But the Narwhale is a treasure; if we sell it, we'll make a lot even after considering loans. They'd be up pitting themselves against the landlords of the north, but I still wouldn't want it shipped here.. it would be tantamount to declaring war, with a lot of money at stake.”

The violence of the northerners resisted the Church's seizure of the Narwhale.. but if they attacked the Church it really would mean war.

“How about it? If you can resolve this situation, your future will be a bright one.”

It would be, indeed. Eve was in a position to use Lawrence as a member of the Rowen Trading Guild. The north and south sides of town had no love for each other, and he had rare secret access to Eve.. no one was in a better position to spy than Lawrence was. But there was a hole in this logic that could cause him to fall to his death: Keeman knew about his relationship with Eve.

“So, are you willing to help me? No..”

She shook her head as if to cancel her words. She then looked into his eyes.

“What compensation do you want for finishing this job?”

She was asking him to become a traitor. She knew that. She would also know what a guild meant to a merchant from the south. And yet she still pressured him. How much.. he clasped his hands and assumed a thinking posture. This was just a discussion about profit.

“Give me some time to think it over, won't you?”

Eve shook her head wordlessly. If he refused, they could instantly end up as enemies.. it was a distinct possibility. And still, she wasn't giving him a chance to hesitate. No one could be a capable spy if they couldn't immediately decide which side they stood for.

But Lawrence had no choice but to hesitate – he had no idea what Keeman was scheming. What if he learned of this conversation? What if he forced Lawrence into acting as his errand-runner? Where was the profit in that? The possibility of profit could tilt the scales of a situation, so merchants always considered everything in terms of profit and loss.. or rather, they were almost incapable of thinking in other terms.

“Is it because of the bones of the wolf-god?”

Eve pressed him, as though she could see through him. Perhaps she remembered their chat when they first met in Gerube.

“Your instincts ought to be telling you that Reynolds is serious, and that he came to me.”

She smiled. Lawrence had been right, and it seemed she knew the details after all.. she might even know who Reynolds wanted to contact.

“You were aware of that, yet you still wrote me a letter of introduction.”

“Are you angry?”

“No, I'm just happy that I guessed correctly.”

Eve sneered, then stood up and throw two logs on the fire. Lawrence kept the conversation going.



“People from the north usually use coal, not wood.”

“But we're still more generous to the poor.”

“Ho ho.. looks like that kid's welcome wherever he goes.”

Lawrence wanted to figure out her angle. Her expression shifted, and her voice assumed her usual stoic, hard-to-judge tone.

“So how about it? It's not a bad offer, is it?”

“Perhaps.”

Dealing with the devil placed one at risk. If he accepted, Lawrence would have to move against his guild's interests. If that was discovered, he would be expelled.. and punished. Holo had told him not to worry, but Lawrence could imagine Keeman's expression. It wasn't an exaggeration that a merchant in that situation could find themselves dead.

“You met with Keeman?”

Lawrence's face didn't react much at Eve's question, but it was only because he was past his limit and ability to quickly respond.

“If you went to gather information, you would have had to mention my name. I can guess how that man responded.”

It was like she was remembering an old friend. Was that the kind of relationship they shared? No.. Lawrence couldn't see that as a possibility.

“Heh.. he's really an outstanding merchant.”

“True. There are talented people in every guild. He's one of them.”

Eve seemed quite relaxed, so Lawrence took the chance to question her.

“What did Keeman do to you?”

“Nothing interesting.. but I'm always his goal. I guess you could say he's a threat to me.”

There was a silvery glint in her squinted eyes as she spoke.. it was quite wolf-like.

“..I see.”

“He's quite terrible. He's caused me much suffering.”

She stared at the table while smiling.. even though it wasn't a good memory. But this was no time to dwell on memories.

“Hey..”

“Yes?”

“Why don't you quit your guild?”

Her gentle question didn't surprise him. Rather it was the notion that he could afford to quit.. it didn't seem at all possible.

“You know what a merchant like me stands to lose by quitting their guild, don't you?”

Their network of contacts, their special privileges, their reputation.. all of these would be gone. And with them, fame and fortune, and the safety of having allies in every town. He might as well just declare bankruptcy.

“Join mine.”

Eve spoke while fiddling with the corner of a document.

“Yours?”

“Indeed. Join my company.”

Reynolds had mentioned the Boland company.. so it really existed? As Lawrence pondered over it, Eve stared off into the distance while touching her lips.

“I'm being kept here by the order of the one who punched me.”

Her pallid fingers were long and thin.. not at all like Holo's. Lawrence felt like he was resisting the calls of a mermaid, forcefully keeping his cool.

“He's the grandchild of one of the owners of the delta, and has contracts with just about everyone who's involved. He's two years my younger, and always as persistent about money as his nerves will allow. He truly cares about me.”

Sarcasm again. Her face was showing signs of loneliness.. was she doing it on purpose?

“He dreams of leaving Gerube. He was so serious about finding and selling the Narwhale, then using the capital to start a large company in the south.. he asked me to keep it secret from his uncle so as to not anger him. He held my shoulder while asking me, with the same hand that punched me.”

There was a pause as she almost laughed. She concealed it by taking a deep breath, but the smile on her face made it obvious.

“Are you surprised that I would betray all of this?”

Lawrence felt coldness spread in his heart as she spoke. She was trying to convince him to betray his own guild and bring her information about the Narwhale.. she was trying to return the advantage to the northern landowners. But if her captor wanted to use the Narwhale to flee to the south, she saw it fit to betray him. Her eyes went trained on Lawrence, with the word “betrayal” practically written on them.

“Keeman is also trying to use me.”

Lawrence had lost the thread of the conversation. He couldn't follow her logic as she continued uttering sentence after sentence.. he was mystified.

“He knows that man is crazy about me. He wants to use me to manipulate him.”

Her eyes pierced the air like a warrior heading to a battlefield. She was revealing new information; things that Lawrence couldn't possibly have known, and had no way to verify. She was explaining them in detail, and he couldn't tell why. It was impossible to follow her.

“Keeman's trying to destroy the power base of the landowners. He wants to use the Narwhale to win the land for himself. If that man trades him the deed for the Narwhale, he'll flee south. It's ridiculous, huh? But when I pointed that out, well, you already know what his answer was..”

Eve seemed to ask her question to pause and give Lawrence a chance to catch up.

“He's not quite as crazy about me now.”

She gazed at him, and he remained firmly seated in his chair.

“I know why Keeman's doing this. Old men don't like change. Even if the world around them changes, they're still set in their ways. It's as true here in the north and south as anywhere. Of course, the younger generation is always angry about that.. Keeman probably felt that way for a long time, presuming that only a radical change would begin a new era in Gerube. He wants to

raise his reputation, but what can he do on his own? He has to skillfully ally with others to achieve such a goal.”

“Is that how you fell into his trap?”

Lawrence finally spoke up. Eve raised her head in surrender. He knew he was being unreasonable.

“I've no way to confirm if what you say is true.. should I trust you?”

The woman who silently reigned over the Roam river smiled.

“Use your experience to decide.”

“My experience of being cheated?”

“Indeed. Remember that famous merchant saying.”

Her toothless smile was all business.

“A real merchant is only impressed when the wool is pulled over their eyes.”

She laughed as though she was drunk.. and perhaps she was. It was unreal how many traps she had laid in their discussion. But Lawrence had made up his mind. He stood up; staying here would be dangerous.

“I take it that's a 'no'?”

After such a long, dream-like conversation this question was colder than the water in the river. He even felt cold on his back.

“Then Keeman will get your help. A sensible answer.. but a pity nonetheless.”

She smiled happily.

“Even Ted Reynolds of D'Jean Company came to me for help because of my network of contacts. No one could resist my command. You're after the wolf-god's bones, huh?”

Eve Boland, the former noble, the female merchant, was threatening him. Lawrence unconsciously placed his hand on the knife on his waist.

“If you think I came unarmed, you're dead wrong.”

Her smile vanished. The guard outside might not eavesdrop, but he still held a sword, and Lawrence knew he wasn't hired just for fun.. and merchants weren't skilled fighters. He pulled his hand away from his side, and bid her farewell before turning to leave. As his hand touched the door, she spoke.

“You'll live to regret this.”

She echoed Keeman's own threat. Lawrence steeled himself and opened the door. The guard was still leaning against the wall in the corridor with his eyes closed. Those eyes opened as Lawrence passed him, filled with a look as if he intended to draw his sword.

“Keep your mouth shut.”

He only ended up whispering to Lawrence, but didn't get so much as nod back. It was an unnecessary threat, since Lawrence had no intent of mentioning this encounter. He had the experience of an outstanding merchant, but he knew just how small he was in his little corner of the world.

There were people here lavishly wasting more money than Lawrence could even imagine. They were living in an entirely different world from Lawrence.. it was something he couldn't forget. After opening the door outside, he saw the carriage waiting for him.

“Please come in.”

The three workers from before were still carving furs on the other side of the carriage. They were clearly look-outs. The driver passed his coat to Lawrence, who put it on before entering the carriage.

Should he seek Keeman's protection? Eve had revealed too much to him.. she certainly wouldn't just let him walk away. Maybe it was best to flee Gerube straight away, as if canceling all transactions and escaping a dangerous deal?

When Lawrence finally snapped back to reality, they had arrived back at his inn. He thanked the carriage driver mechanically, then sighed as entered the inn. Hearing that, the innkeeper's head popped out from behind bar. Lawrence must have looked terrible, because the innkeeper asked him if he needed a drink. But he politely declined, and made his way back to his room.

Their best course of action would be to leave before Keeman learned where they were staying. They would have to give up on their leads regarding the wolf-god's bones.. that was a tough loss. But if D'Jean Company was on the case, they might still be able to gather clues in other towns they were associated with.

Lawrence reached for the doorknob and pulled it. What he had to do now was steady the boat he was on so it could weather this storm. If someone was asked to describe the look on his face, they wouldn't find it easy.

“Hey, someone sent this to you.”

The letter in Holo's outstretched hand was sealed with an unmistakable stamp.. the stamp of the Rowen guild. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that chunk of wax might as well be the Devil's signature.

His mouth was dry, but Lawrence still swallowed. Their whereabouts were known. Keeman was dead serious. So was Eve. Things had spiraled beyond his control. The wheel of fate was spinning ominously.

## ●支倉凍砂著作リスト

「狼と香辛料」(電撃文庫)

「狼と香辛料II」(同)

「狼と香辛料III」(同)

「狼と香辛料IV」(同)

「狼と香辛料V」(同)

「狼と香辛料VI」(同)

「狼と香辛料VII Side Colors」(同)