SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 8
Town of Strife I
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 8

THE TOWN OF STRIFE I

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura

Watching Col's shocked face in that moment was rather amusing.
– Tote Cole the Vagabond Boy
"It's a kind of fate, being a likable person," he added, smiling as she removed the scarf she wore, baring her face.
– Eve the Merchant Woman

"Is that all?" she asked quietly
under his hand, closing one eye
and twitching her ears happily.

"Never thought a man would come in here with a letter from that wolf of a woman. How'd you get her over the fire, I'd like to know."
—Ted Reynolds, Master of the Jean Company

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Volume VIII
The Town of Strife I

Isuna Hasekura

YEN ON
New York

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SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 8: The Town of Strife I ISUNA HASEKURA

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PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

The moon hid behind clouds, and darkness covered the area.

An occasional cold wind blew, gently ruffling her hair.

Contained in a lamp made from bent wire, a tallow flame flickered uncertainly.

It was cold, bitterly cold.

The sound of ice crushing under weight accompanied the progress of the fully loaded wagon.

No one opened their mouths. The entire party remained silent as they advanced.

Beside the wagon bed, the unsteady lamplight flickered, illuminating the horse's thick neck and the back of the horseman who walked ahead, holding the reins.

It was like a procession of corpses.

There are many such stories.

But the difference here was that in the line there was one who stood stock-still.

The figure held no lamp, but rather a staff, perhaps to beat either the horse—or its master.

That single person stopped and looked.

And in the deathly, expressionless procession, only one face conveyed surprise.

"Good evening."

The abrupt words echoed loudly, perhaps because of the frigid air.

Had one crouched down and scooped up a handful of the gravel underfoot, it would have been indistinguishable from the ice itself.

The individual to whom the greeting was directed was a grizzled veteran of a merchant, one who would meet even the most unexpected circumstance with calm.

And yet it took even her some time to grasp the situation.

“A swift horse, eh?” she asked, in such a way that made it clear he knew it was not the case.

Since no merchant ever shows his entire hand, he did not deign to answer the question.

She shook her head there in the shadows.

The wind blew.

In the darkness, the caravan of wagons quietly proceeded beneath the light cast by the torches affixed to the city wall’s entrance, as if heading for the gallows.

In truth, she would’ve liked to use her advantage to its maximum effect.

But reality is smaller and sadder than a play. It often happens that one has no strength remaining when one needs it most.

It was not as if she had reached this place by some magic after all.

“Let us talk in a warm inn, shall we?” She spoke in place of the others, who were too exhausted to open their mouths.

“Miss Eve.”

Her counterpart was a grizzled merchant.

To her practical proposal, he gave an equally practical reply.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“Mmph…mmn…”

She moved her mouth, chewing for a moment, swallowing quickly, then opening it again.

When the spoon delivered her another bite of porridge, she quickly bit down.

Occasionally she would chew on the spoon like a teething puppy, despite her age.

This “puppy” had eaten two wooden bowls of the bread crust–thickened porridge, at which point she finally seemed sated. She licked her lips clean, then sighed. As she reclined on her side atop two large pillows grandly stuffed with wool, there was something about her that seemed distinctly like a princess at rest.

But sadly, her physique was far too thin at the moment for her to be called regal.

Having had the great honor of embracing that body, the man’s impression was that even if she wasn’t actually that thin, at the very least he could not deny that she *looked* quite sinewy.

No, he revised his opinion—what made her look particularly shabby today was that in a rare occurrence, her hair was sleep mussed and tangled.

And also perhaps because the swelling in her face made her appear extremely displeased.

The shabby princess’s name was Holo.

And, of course, Holo was not a princess, although there was every possibility she had once been called a queen, perhaps somewhere in the far north.

Atop Holo’s head sprouted a pair of proud, pointed wolf ears, and from her waist grew a majestic puff of a tail.

Though she currently appeared to be a teenage girl, her true form was that of an enormous wolf, large enough to eat a full-grown man in a single bite. She called herself a wisewolf and had lived for centuries among the wheat, guaranteeing a good harvest.

Yet despite her lineage, which was as proud as any dynasty of kings, when he saw her like this, he could understand why the villagers who had prayed to her for a good harvest had finally ceased to rely on her.

It was true, he had to admit, that her vaunted dignity and authority vanished once she had him feed her, her hair still bed mussed.

That said, the idea that she had opened her heart to him enough that she didn't mind looking unsightly in his presence held a certain appeal.

Lawrence could only regard it as a telling action on her part.

After all, while this was the second time she had indulged in having him feed her, he still had no memory of her ever thanking him.

This time around, she acted as if the act was the most natural thing in the world, and once she finished eating, she belched loudly, then twitched her ears. Her gaze was distant. Perhaps she was remembering something.

A moment later, her brow furrowed in displeasure.

"Who would ever conceive of a wisewolf complaining of muscle pain?" she asked as he tidied the dishes, her eyes returning to the here and now. "For me to be so frail, you must think me…ngh…," said Holo, trying to lean her head forward and failing.

Throughout the previous day, Holo had sprinted across the wilderness carrying Lawrence on her back with one other, the wandering boy student, Col.

Perhaps she was happy at being able to run her heart out in the sunlight, but when they'd arrived at the inn, she was so exhausted she couldn't climb the stairs to their room—and yet up until she fell asleep, her eyes had glittered with a strange excitement.

She had scarcely rested while running, waiting for Lawrence and Col—who merely clung to her back—to cry out for a break.

Holo, in her endless desire to run, had seemed less like a prudent, careful wolf and more like a dog released onto a field. Lawrence had meant to be sarcastic about it, but when he praised her fleetness of foot, her faced swelled with a pride unlike any she had ever shown before.

In her huge wolf form, she was covered in coarse hair that seemed composed of silver wire, and when she sat proudly, he felt a presence from her that was truly worthy of the label “god.”

But when she was so genuinely pleased at his sarcastic praise, he couldn’t help but let slip a rueful grin.

Holo had been worshipped for centuries as a harvest god, so she probably couldn’t help how much she enjoyed expressing herself with childlike openness—and unless Lawrence interpreted her actions in this favorable light, it would have been easy to forget entirely that she was in fact a wisewolf.

But, of course, he knew from their travels thus far that this was simply her true disposition.

So Lawrence praised when he could.

If he’d said any more, her busy tail might have wagged itself right off.

Thanks to her efforts, Holo had appeared so poorly this morning that it had been difficult to look at her, and her constitution was so ravaged that Lawrence could practically hear it. He recalled a truly serious illness.

When it came out that she was merely sore, he was so relieved that he wanted to yell at her for having made him think otherwise.

After all, she could not lift her arms or turn her head, and her back hurt too much for her to stand—the very image of a very sick person, indeed.

What distinguished her from a sick person was her entirely healthy appetite.

“Ah, well, I suppose it’s what comes of running so far while carrying two people on your back.”

“Aye, ’tis true I ran a bit too hard.”

The only parts of her body she could properly move were her ears and tail.

But despite her terrible condition, she did not appear particularly regretful.

Even if she had come to greatly enjoy this girl's form, perhaps she simply felt her true wolf form fit her better.

When he thought about it like that, perhaps one of the sources of her displeasure during their journeys thus far was simple frustration at being unable to freely travel in her true form.

"Still," she said as Lawrence considered it. She yawned slightly before continuing, "'Tis shameful to be in such pain that I cannot get out of bed. 'Twould have been less so if those who rode on my back were also unable to rise in the morning."

She could not move her body, but her mouth worked quite well.

Holo smiled maliciously, but her attitude was completely artificial and thus hard to take seriously.

If Col had been there, he probably would have been at least moderately flustered, but fortunately he was out.

"If you're so much wiser and farseeing such that I should just leave everything to you, then perhaps I should just go ahead and follow your lead. Except I trust you haven't forgotten last night, have you?" asked Lawrence, and for once Holo did not refute him.

Quite the contrary—she bit her lip in frustration and turned away.

She seemed to remember the previous night's failure all too well.

"Honestly. Forget following your lead—I've got to keep a tighter grip on your reins. Just who did you say was whose driver again?"

It seemed like a good opportunity to make Holo consider the consequences of her actions, Lawrence thought as he pressed her.

The previous day, Holo's speed had compelled them to disembark from the boat heading down the Roam River, and they arrived in the port town of Kerube in half a day. Had they stayed on the boat, the same distance would have taken two full days.

Such speed was swifter than any horse they could have hired.

There was, in fact, a reason they had traveled so quickly.

They were pursuing stories of the bones of a great wolf found in a village in the mountainous Roef region. They had no proof, but it seemed likely they came from a wisewolf not unlike Holo, and there was the possibility that the Church authorities would attempt to desecrate the remains in order to display their own might.

That was not something Holo could abide.

Lawrence was not so arbitrary as to change his initial plan and head down the river to chase that story for that reason alone—but he was likewise not honest enough to say aloud the true reason. For his part, Lawrence was using the excuse that he wanted them to end their travels with a smile, but if he had asked Holo, there was no doubt that she would have prepared a different excuse.

In the process of gathering information regarding the wolf bones, they had discovered that among those pursuing the relics were Church authorities in the Roam River region.

And that was why they had come to the port town of Kerube—to speak with Eve, who undoubtedly knew the Roam River region front to back.

Eve, once a noblewoman and now a ruined merchant, had once conspired with the Church in Lenos, so there was no doubt her information network was deep. Also, there had been the fur incident in Lenos, where she had sunk a boat in the river simply to block it as part of her fur-export scheme, which gave Lawrence ample ingredients with which to question her.

Thus, Lawrence, Col, and Holo had disembarked from Ragusa's vessel, and the former two had climbed upon Holo's back in pursuit of Eve.

But they had miscalculated. After arriving at the ship they had pursued for some time, they found that Eve was not aboard.

However, they did find Arold, the master of the inn in Lenos where Lawrence and Holo had stayed. That was enough to tell them that the ship was somehow involved with Eve, but strangely, the large volume of furs that it should have been carrying was nowhere to be found.

There was no mistaking the fact that Eve had packed up the furs and was trying to reach Kerube.

Which meant there was a high probability that she had switched to an overland route midway through her journey. Even had she used a ship in order to transport the goods quickly, if the distance was not too far, it was hardly as if other methods were not available.

Supposing—either through good luck or as part of her plan—she had managed to procure some horses, the choice to switch to an overland route midway would not be so very strange.

On the contrary, given that a vessel had been sunk so as to block the following river traffic, it was obvious that the responsible party would be someone who had loaded that first ship with furs. Blithely toting her furs down the river was like loudly proclaiming herself to be the culprit, so switching to land travel would be a good way to avoid such suspicions.

Lawrence thought about it and concluded that Eve was already en route to Kerube. Holo had wanted to interrogate Arold as to her destination, but Lawrence managed to rein her in and continue downriver.

Around twilight, Holo had spotted a far-off caravan, confirming Lawrence's theory.

Eve led the line of horses.

Lawrence and Holo got ahead of her and waited for her arrival at the entrance to the port town of Kerube.

At that moment, Eve's face looked as if she had encountered the living corpse of someone she knew to be dead and buried.

Eve entered Kerube with Lawrence and the others, her hair fluttering in the wind that was so cold it seemed to blow directly out of an ice cave. After a short discussion, they stayed at an inn she had recommended.

The reunion took Eve completely by surprise, giving Lawrence the upper hand, but he could not help but conduct their brief conversation with a certain amount of sighing.

Holo had changed back from a wolf into a girl, and though she still glared at him, she was too tired to properly speak.

It was not as if Lawrence was unable to predict what would happen if Holo entered the same room as Eve, whom she had already quarreled with once in Lenos.

However, he had not imagined that it would come to actual blows.

“’Tis on account of your lukewarm disposition. Have you so easily forgotten just who ’twas that gave you that mark upon your face?” Holo emphasized her claim.

“Surely you don’t think that criticizing another proves your own point valid, do you?”

“Hmph…” Holo shut her mouth and pulled her chin in.

She understood that she was the one in the wrong.

Yet Lawrence understood full well the reason she was not quietly accepting that and apologizing.

“I must hand it to Eve on that account. Faced with your threatening mien, she chose to withdraw rather than fight back.”

Holo’s eyes shifted away from Lawrence.

Left alone, Holo would have lunged at Eve right on the spot, but Lawrence had physically restrained her from doing so.

Eve’s eyes had looked them over with a snakelike coldness, neither intimidated nor dismissive, and in the end, she had even smiled slightly.

“It’s because she judged that picking a fight with us there held no profit for her.”

“Oh, so now you’ll talk to me like a child who knows not loss from gain?” snapped Holo, closing her mouth. Her expression was more and more strained, as though a thousand times as many words were swirling about within her throat.

Lawrence watched her, feeling rather exhausted.

Looking at her ears made it obvious she wasn't truly angry.

So as to why she would have acted the way she did—

"It's because Eve could tell that your anger wasn't rational, isn't it? You were angry like a child is angry. All notions of profit aside."

In other words, Eve had realized she had tread upon a tail she should not have.

If her opponent had been rationally angry, then Eve could have met her with reason, but trying to reason with an anger of passion would only have had the opposite effect. So Eve had meekly lowered her head.

At which point, Holo, while still angry, had to acknowledge Eve's sense and let her go.

And yet she could not simply accept the situation.

While logic required Holo to excuse Eve, it was no easy thing. Holo ground her teeth before Eve's spell-like influence. To break the confrontation off required Lawrence to work some magic of his own.

She certainly was a troublesome princess.

"Well, having had such a passionate confrontation, it should make it easier to talk rationally. Easier for us to find some profit."

"…And?" Holo glared at him.

Embarrassed, Lawrence slackened his shoulders and sighed softly.

It was a sigh of acquiescence.

"If it was for me that you were so angry…thank you."

Since ancient times, promises were customarily made verbally, speaking them aloud—save, for some reason, in business.

Even now, Lawrence could not escape the awkwardness he felt when plainly speaking his feelings, but if Holo required this of him, then he would have to do it anyway.

Negotiation required finding compromises for both parties.

“Aye, if you say so.” The venom finally drained from her face, and her ears flicked rapidly.

The faint chatter of the market across the street was audible through the window.

The winter sunlight was warm, and as long as one was directly in its rays, it felt almost as if spring had come.

Lawrence could not help smiling at the absurdity of it all, and Holo, too, chuckled.

It was a pleasant, peaceful moment and a precious one.

“Now then, I’ll just tidy up the dishes…”

“Aye,” said Holo in response to Lawrence’s statement, which had been mostly to himself. Her gaze fell to her tail—which along with her ears were the only unexhausted parts of her body—as if she wanted to groom it.

It was a scene that had replayed itself many times on their journey.

However, there was one element that differed from their usual arrangement.

The element in question was Col, who had gone shopping in the marketplace, which Lawrence remembered when there was a knock at the door. After a few moments’ wait, the door opened, and there stood Col, carrying a wooden bowl.

Lawrence searched his memory for exactly what it was that Col had gone out to buy, and in that moment, a strong smell reached his nose—a peculiar smell, like sweet herbs boiled in sulfurous water.

He flinched away at the overwhelming odor, but Col seemed not to mind it one bit.

“I made a salve!” he said, cheerily entering the room.

From his labored breathing, Lawrence could tell the boy had hurried.

Holo had taken a liking to Col and patted his head. Meanwhile, Col seemed to have become quite taken with Holo.

Upon seeing her state this morning, he had bounded out of the room like a hare, off into the morning bustle of the town.

The people of the northlands had exceptional knowledge of medicinal herbs like these.

It was not an overstatement to say they had remedies for everything from cuts to fevers. He had surely made a salve that would be effective for muscle pain.

Lawrence's thoughts got that far, but then he stopped himself short.

Holo.

Lawrence turned around to see the keen-eared, keen-nosed wisewolf of Yoitsu having literally turned tail and curled up in agony at the smell.

He could not help but sympathize.

But could she turn down the medicinal salve that Col had made out of the kindness of his heart?

Lawrence ignored the desperately pleading glance that Holo gave him from behind her pillow, and the moment he passed Col—

"Ah, this salve will work on your wounds, too, Mr. Lawrence."

Holo had buried her face in the pillow, but her ears pricked up happily upon hearing this.

The salve had a deep green color and a suspiciously thick consistency.

Lawrence applied some of it to a piece of cloth, then applied it to the swollen section of his right cheek. Instantly, the pungent scent pierced him like a needle, and an intense heat spread throughout his face. It stung his eyes and seemed to almost wrench his nose.

And yet Col had spared some of his meager traveling funds to make the balm, so it could not be allowed to go to waste.

Still, the terrible smell…

When Lawrence rubbed it on Holo's shoulders and back, she looked at him with truly terrified eyes. Given how sensitive her nose was, she was doubtlessly truly suffering.

And yet some part of Lawrence felt as if he should not have to be the only one

forced to endure the stuff, and given that it did seem to be effective, he rubbed it on Holo all the same.

Holo made indescribable noises as he applied it to her, none of which were remotely charming.

As penance, Lawrence would probably have to buy her new clothes later. That or some fine wine.

Once he was finished rubbing it in, she gave him a final, venomous glance, which he supposed was unavoidable.

“Oh, that’s right. The merchant we met yesterday on the way here said she wants to meet with you.”

Once he finished applying the salve to the places on Holo’s body that were particularly afflicted, Lawrence wiped the excess from his hands.

It seemed clear enough that it was strong medicine, so it probably would have some sort of effect.

As he replied to Col, Lawrence regarded Holo from the corner of his eye—she was curled up and groaning on the bed, probably from the salve’s smell. “The merchant we met yesterday? You mean Eve?”

“That’s right.”

“Haste is a virtue, eh? She’ll be gone today or tomorrow, I guess.”

Though she was fallen nobility, Eve was moving up in the merchants’ world with incredible momentum.

In Lenos, the town of lumber and fur, she had ensnared Lawrence as part of an unbelievable fur trade. In addition to the fur she had gained in her enormous gamble, she had gone to the absurd length of sinking a ship in the river so that no one else would be able to move fur the way she had.

With her cunning mind and abundant pluck, she had taken every precaution, but if she dawdled in this town, the dike she had built of dangerous dealings was likely to burst. She would want to hasten far away as soon as possible.

Also, she had to move the fur she had brought from Lenos from here to the next town.

While the town had only just begun to rise, it was probably too slow for Eve.

“Where did she say I should go?”

“Er, she said she’d visit the inn after a bit.”

“…I see.”

Eve was a rather busy person at the moment, so that she would go out of her way to come here carried heavy implications.

The first thing Lawrence thought was that she would want to avoid being accused of sinking the ship in the Roam River.

“So, did you eat breakfast?”

“Huh? Ah…er, yes.”

While he lacked Holo’s talent for it, as a merchant, Lawrence was reasonably good at spotting lies.

He lightly poked Col’s head, and then without saying anything, he thrust a sack of bread at him.

Most likely he had used his breakfast money to buy the herbs with which he had brewed and made the salve.

With the dangerous goal of using Church authority to protect a pagan village, Col had traveled to the south to study Church law—the boy was more orthodox than the orthodox.

Col hesitated to accept the sack, but Lawrence pretended not to notice, venturing over to Holo, who was still moaning under the blanket.

When he informed her of his plan to go out for a bit, she did not raise her head, replying instead with her ears.

Lawrence had wondered if the odor might be enough to make her faint, but surprisingly, that appeared not to be the case.

Lawrence, too, had begun to find the scent less off-putting. The swollen patch on his right cheek felt somehow hot, and in turn, the bruise began to feel better.

Holo the wolf surely, he supposed, had an even clearer understanding of the medicine's effect on her body.

From the far side of the bed, he heard the words, "I'll not forgive you if you lose." From this, he concluded his guess was not incorrect.

A bit relieved, Lawrence looked over his shoulder, whereupon Col—who had been holding the sack abashedly for some time—stood, bread in both hands.

The bag contained both normal rye bread and rye baked with milk, but Col held only the former. Lawrence could not help but grin at the boy's reserve.

He wished Holo would learn a bit from it.

"So, are you coming?" Lawrence asked, meaning if Col planned to come along to the meeting with Eve.

Col's eyes darted about for a moment, but then he nodded.

Lawrence intended to ask Eve about the wolf's leg bone that supposedly came from a spirit or god like Holo, which in turn was the god that the village of Col's birth worshipped.

It was to discover the truth of the stories surrounding this wolf-god's bone that Col was traveling with Lawrence and Holo in the first place.

All of which meant that he had every reason to want to come along.

And yet Lawrence had the feeling that if he hadn't invited the boy along, he would not have come.

Despite his youth, he was of a nervously polite disposition.

His attraction to Holo was surely rooted in his finding her casual arrogance refreshing.

"Well, you'd best finish that bread quickly, then," said Lawrence as he left the

room, and Col hastily jammed the bread into his mouth.

“R-right!”

Lawrence then offered a further statement. “Once you’re finished, of course, don’t forget your ‘I just ate rye bread!’ face!”

Though Col had enjoyed a good, cultured upbringing in the abbey, it seemed his impoverished travels had wreaked havoc on his table manners, and he was a bit wild.

His cheeks packed squirrel-like with bread, he stood there blankly.

He then seemed to understand what Lawrence meant, and swallowing the bread with a grin, he answered, “The Church also teaches that we should hide our mouths when we eat.”

“But that’s to hide when you’re eating something *good*, is it not?”

Lawrence closed the door and began to walk with Col following one step behind him like a faithful son.

“Thank you for the bread. It was delicious,” said Col—and being a bright lad, he said it with a bit of a smile.

The first floor of the inn was a dining area.

It was generally accepted that only travelers indulged in the extravagance known as “breakfast,” so those sitting at the tables were all dressed for journeying.

Among them was Eve at her table, looking as she always did. At a glance, she appeared every bit a traveler about to start on some journey.

And it was entirely possible that her appearance was accurate. What most concerned Lawrence at that moment was that not only did Eve have her face mostly hidden behind the scarf she wrapped around it, but also that the scarf covered her nose.

“…What a terrible odor.”

The innkeeper behind the counter was giving Lawrence a dirty look, and the other customers were stunned enough that they forgot their anger.

Lawrence remained defiantly unworried, and Col for his part seemed genuinely unconcerned.

While the scents that people preferred differed from region to region, surely this was an extreme example, Lawrence thought to himself as he sat across from Eve.

Whereupon Eve said something truly unexpected.

“Still, I’ve not smelled this in a long time. Doubtless that bruise of yours will be gone by evening.”

The right cheek to which Col’s salve had been applied was the same right cheek that Eve had struck hard with a hatchet handle during her fight with Lawrence.

Her tone was slightly joking. “So he prepared a remedy for you, eh? Educated lad,” she said with mild exaggeration in her voice, looking past Lawrence to Col, who stood behind him. “From Roef, are you?”

Eve quietly fixed Col in her gaze, then closed her eyes briefly.

Lawrence could not guess at what she might have been thinking.

“At any rate, I know the banks of the Roam River backward and forward. And it’s that knowledge that you’ve pursued me here for, yes? And with such unbelievable speed that I can’t imagine how you managed it.”

Through the gap in the scarf with which she hid her face, her eyes narrowed.

It was the virtue of all merchants that even if they had been prepared to kill each other yesterday, if their interests were aligned today, they’d happily shake hands. Without a contractual relationship, there would be no lingering emotional resentment.

Even given everything that had happened in Lenos, they were now like old acquaintances.

“My shock last night was the deepest I’ve had in many years. I wondered if there’d been some mistake with the contract.”

Though he always found himself confused by Holo’s roundabout way of speaking, this sort of exchange was one Lawrence understood all too well.

The buzzing in his chest was an emotion not unlike love.

This game merchants played, each trying to sound the other out and learn the other's true motives—it was a delight, it *tickled*.

"It's true, I seek only your knowledge—no contract of trade binds us." Given the circumstances, Lawrence wanted to make it entirely clear that he was not after Eve's furs.

Eve nodded faintly, then stood from her seat. "Let's move elsewhere. We're only earning the ire of the innkeeper and our fellow patrons here," she said impishly.

But it was not necessarily a joke, so Lawrence stood and, with Col in tow, followed Eve.

"So, what of your companion?" she asked.

They emerged from the inn onto a narrow street—it was more of a broad alleyway, truth be told.

The town of Kerube was divided into northern and southern halves by the river, and the inn at which Lawrence was staying was on the northern part.

Clean buildings were few and far between on the north side, and while the riverside market was a lively one, even a short distance away alleys and slumping construction were common. The overwhelming impression was one of desperation.

Building height was far from uniform, either because the local government had generous policies on matters of scenic aesthetics, or because it simply lacked the political power to do anything about this.

Lawrence mused on the matter as Eve headed without hesitation to the opposite side of the market.

"My companion is quite tired from our journey. She's in bed with this salve on her body."

"That's…" Eve trailed off, then looked back to Col, and behind her scarf Lawrence could tell she was smiling. "…Well, you'll know soon enough."

Even if it had not been about Holo, Lawrence could tell she had restrained

herself from offering sarcastic condolences.

Col wore a proud, if oblivious, smile.

“Still, that may be fortunate for me. And fortunate for you, as well, I should say.”

“For both sides, then.” Lawrence slumped and gave a tired smile.

Holo’s anger was the reason he had not asked Eve what she knew the previous night.

“Still, someone who will become angry on your behalf is a precious asset. You’d best value her.”

“She thinks of me as *her* asset, and she was probably angry at her property being damaged.”

Eve’s shoulders shook beneath her cloak.

She then veered toward the edge of the street, to avoid a woman approaching them with a basketful of winter vegetables.

They were undoubtedly bound for sale at the market, and compared to their summer counterparts, they were a deep green and looked cold. No doubt they were best used in soup rather than eaten raw or pickled.

“If you are indeed your companion’s property, she would’ve sought compensation. But she instead sought revenge.” Lawrence thought he saw a flash of loneliness in Eve’s pale blue eyes.

Eve’s house had fallen into poverty, and she’d been sold, name and all, to a wealthy merchant looking to purchase a noble title for himself.

Money. Or revenge.

Lawrence felt as though just thinking about it caused Eve pain.

He regretted the poor choice of words his banter showed.

“Heh. Once you’ve inspired your opponent’s guilt and sympathy, it makes dealing with them that much easier,” said Eve.

At her words, Lawrence returned to his senses with a start.

Techniques of seduction and false tears always trumped more honest ways of doing business.

Despite his wariness, he'd been taken in.

But Lawrence smiled and scratched his head abashedly, naturally with good reason. "And why would you venture to admit that?" he asked, enjoying posing the riddle as he looked at Col, who was concentrating hard as he tried to follow the conversation. "By revealing your own trap to me like that, you're trying to get me to let my guard down."

"Indeed. Thus my fangs will sink in all the deeper."

There was no doubt that if she removed her scarf, she'd be smiling and showing her fangs at that very moment.

He thought he understood now what Holo meant when she called Eve a "vixen."

As a merchant, Eve was very like a wolf, but Holo did not want to acknowledge her as a peer.

"Ah, we've arrived."

"Where's this?"

As soon as they stopped, Col walked right into Lawrence. The boy had undoubtedly been concentrating on the conversation between Lawrence and Eve, trying to understand even some small piece of it.

Lawrence remembered doing the same thing with his own master, and it made him a bit nostalgic.

"My foothold in this town. If I told you it's like a trading company without a sign, you'd be able to imagine what I meant, no?"

In contrast to the surrounding buildings, the walls were blackened and the roof seemed likely to slide right down into the alley, although the stone foundation seemed sturdy enough.

Col seemed worried by Eve's theatrical statement and gulped nervously.

But of course she was joking. A closer look at the black walls revealed a

discolored patch where something had been removed.

In other words, a ruined or bankrupt trading company.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d tease us a little less,” said Lawrence to Eve’s back as she put her hand to the door, at which point he heard Col let slip a small “huh?”

The boy seemed to have realized in that moment that he was the only one who had not understood.

Eve turned, though surely not to confirm Col’s reaction. “Out of consideration for your adorable little apprentice?” she inquired, amused.

“Unfortunately, he’s not my apprentice, nor is he a merchant. So I wish you’d not twist the poor lad’s mind too much.”

At these words, Eve burst out laughing in a most un-Eve-like manner. “Ha-ha-ha! It’s true! Oh, it’s true—we merchants are a twisted lot.”

Unconcerned with the frustration of poor Col, whose jaw clenched at this exchange that went right over his head, the two twisted merchants entered the building.

Lawrence looked back over his shoulder at Col, who followed with an expression of displeasure on his face.

He must have thought he was being made sport of.

Lawrence grimaced and heaved a long-suffering sigh.

It occurred to him that too much time around merchants would distort the boy’s pleasant disposition. Such a waste.

They were served warm goat’s milk mixed with butter and mead.

In Col’s case, he received plain honey in the mead’s stead.

Perhaps owing to the butter’s quality, it made Lawrence wish for some slightly bitter rye bread to go with it.

“So Arold has not yet arrived, then?”

As soon as they all entered the building, silence fell in the interior.

The only sounds were the crackling of the fire in the fireplace and the goat’s

milk bubbling away in a pot directly beside it.

There were no other sounds as Lawrence watched Eve sit in front of the fireplace and prepare their drinks with surprising efficiency.

“Probably by this evening. Will you eat?” asked Eve, holding some rye bread that she’d cut into chunks with a knife.

Into the earthen-rimmed wooden bowls was poured the goat’s milk, now boiled down to the point where it resembled melted cheese.

With salt and oil added and topped with slices of herring, there was no doubt it would be delicious.

“If this is the sort of food you eat, your next journey will be a harsh one.”

“Quite right. A taste for fine food sends the costs of travel into the sky. But if you’re not a merchant, there’s no need to worry about such things, is there?” asked Eve, setting a piece of bread before Col. “It’s a kind of fate, being a likable person,” she added, smiling as she removed the scarf she wore, baring her face.

Watching Col’s shocked face in that moment was rather amusing.

“I suppose I’ve a bit of motherliness left in me after all,” declared Eve with a self-mocking smile, hiding her worry and pain. She was startlingly beautiful.

Lawrence had often thought that women were better suited to being merchants than men, and the thought struck him afresh.

Not even the most canny of men could compare with Eve’s ever-changing identities and faces.

“So, you had something to ask me?” Eve broke the silence as she watched Col slowly savor the bread, unlike the way he had wolfed down the portion Lawrence had given him earlier.

“Yes, about a cursed story.”

“Ah, the talk of this riverside company looking for a holy relic—though I don’t know if the pagans would call it ‘holy.’”

Lawrence nodded, and Eve’s gaze became distant.

“Those rumors started circulating in the Roam River region about two years

ago. At the time, anybody who'd ever dirtied his hands in bad business was excited about it."

"And the truth?"

A child could be heard crying far away.

Within the town, the cries of children were more common than birdsong.

"Just what you'd expect. As long as there was no word of the bone being found, the rumors deflated as quickly as they'd spread. It turned into a joke."

He doubted Eve was lying—most importantly, she had no reason to.

And yet smoke didn't rise without a fire at its source.

"Does it fit that the rumor's source would be a company in Lesko, a town up the Roef River, one of the Roam's tributaries?"

The company in Lesko had conducted a trade in copper coins with the Jean Company here in Kerube.

But the copper coin trade had a strange twist. The number of cases of coin that had been imported did not match the number exported.

Lawrence remained ignorant, but Col, whose relish in devouring the bread was enough to make even Eve's eyes narrow in laughter, seemed to realize the reason.

As there was no need to know the answer immediately, Lawrence still had not asked, but if it came to his inability to solve the riddle by himself, one could hardly fail to be frustrated.

"Indeed. I believe it was called the Debau Company. A scenic place where they held the mining rights to Lesko in an iron fist."

"And for this town, they mainly dealt with the Jean Company, yes?"

"Oh ho. I'd love to know where you picked up that little tidbit. You're quite well informed." Eve popped a bit of bread dipped in goat's milk into her mouth.

Lawrence watched this and realized that he could have probably brought Holo along.

Such a delicious dish would doubtless have turned her attitude toward

conciliatory.

“Well informed about the Debau Company in Lesko and the church in Lenos that was so quarrelsome about our furs. And you know the Jean Company here in this town that makes the copper goods trade its cornerstone. The Debau Company and the Jean Company should be on rather good terms.”

“And what would be the reason for that?” Lawrence immediately asked, at which Eve pulled one corner of her lips up in a smirk.

Col noticed this and looked up.

“Apologies. I meant nothing by it,” Eve said, looking down and brushing his mouth with her hand. She then gave Lawrence a sidelong glance. “My impression is that you’re a reasonably cautious merchant. So why are you so concerned about this foolishness?”

Merchants, in general, asked questions only when they already knew the gist of the answer.

Eve smiled calmly, though she seemed as if she was enjoying herself a great deal.

“As I’m sure you’ve guessed, my companion was born in the north,” answered Lawrence.

Eve’s mouth was hidden behind the cup she brought to her lips, her face seeming to say, “I’ll bet she was.” “I doubt you’d pursue such irrational folly unless it was for that fetching young lady of yours.”

“I don’t know about that.” Frustratingly, Lawrence could not help making an excuse.

Eve only smiled with the corners of her eyes and did not press her attack. “Well, if the body of a god once revered in her homeland is being sold off for mere coin, I don’t suppose she can simply stand there and let it happen. But if that’s the case, there’s something that bothers me.”

“And that is?”

Her cup still at her lips, Eve looked at Lawrence with upturned eyes.

Her delighted manner made her seem like a merchant who had discovered

her opponent's weakness and was preparing to beat his prices down.

"You're a merchant who buys with coin, are you not? So are you your companion's ally or her enemy? Are you righteous? Or…are you evil?"

Col froze, suddenly surprised.

It was true—Lawrence was a merchant who made money and dealt with goods on those terms.

Which put him in the same class as those who were attempting to buy the bones of a wolf that was said to have been a god and to put them to who knew what use. Merchants opened all doors with the key of coin.

If this talk of the wolf bone was true and if they managed to discover its whereabouts, Lawrence would surely put his merchant's skills to use in recovering it.

And when he did, what would Holo and Col think of that?

In such a case, was Lawrence their ally? Or was the act itself inherently evil or inherently good?

Lawrence put the goat's milk to his lips before answering.

"It's no sin to buy goods with money. What's often evil is buying things that are not mere goods."

"Meaning?"

"If I were to buy the bone in an attempt to gain influence or power or to attract her attention to me, then she would surely loathe me. But money is after all a tool for purchasing goods. It only becomes evil when it's used to buy other things, like an ax used as a weapon rather than to cut wood. And my companion knows that."

Eve narrowed her eyes, her lips curling still further.

Merchants who dealt with all things in terms of money were often asked about the virtue of such a life.

A merchant's status was reckoned based on how they were able to answer when such a question was put to them.

The quality of one's sense of justice was the measure of a person; placed on a scale, it would balance against his trustworthiness.

It was not certain whether Eve believed it to quite that degree, but the idea was clearly at least part of her calculations.

She smiled grimly upon hearing Lawrence's answer, and her expression suddenly softened as she thrust out the cup she held in her hand. "Well, you're the sort I'd want to do business with. Sorry for asking such strange questions."

Lawrence, too, relaxed his uninjured left cheek and raised his own cup in answer to Eve's.

She barely avoided touching her cup to his, a technique normally used to avoid damaging expensive silver chalices. Her use of the technique showed that she felt the occasion was worthy of fine silver.

"I've said before, I envy you and your companion. I've never felt that so much as I do now."

"I shall take that as a point of pride."

Eve's shoulders shook with her voiceless laugh.

Her gaze shifted from Lawrence to Col, and her merchant's face returned as she spoke. "I understand that you're not Kraft Lawrence's apprentice, and I must tell you, from the depths of my heart, that I think that's a waste."

Col blinked rapidly at the words, then looked down, troubled.

Even as he laughed, Lawrence thought it a shame.

Col's consternation meant that he could not even entertain Eve's suggestion.

Eve seemed to understand that, too, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she was looking at Lawrence. "You probably know this, but the news of the Debau Company searching for the wolf bone is no hundred-*lumione* tale. If you bungle things, you'll learn just how cheap a human life can be. And yet I trust my merchant's instincts, and I'm thinking of trusting you just as much."

Lawrence swirled his cup around, then brought its contents slowly to his lips.

If he failed to make a grand gesture here, Holo would surely be angry with him.

“I’ve chosen life over wealth. But I value my companion still more than my life, so I have expectations of my own.”

His true feelings were out now in this dialogue of life and death with Eve.

Eve bared her teeth in a smile, much like when Holo smiled in her wolf form. “Perhaps it’s not so bad to chase after a treasure map’s treasure once in a while. Fine, then. Your goal’s to draw out information from the Debau Company and their Jean Company confederates, yes? I’ll write you a letter of introduction to the Jean Company. After that”—Eve closed one eye and cocked her head in what must have been her way of expressing confidence—“it’ll all depend on your wits.”

In that moment, he could have fallen for her. Though Lawrence knew if he ever admitted it to Holo, she would tear his throat out, it was nonetheless true.

Eve was a merchant’s merchant.

She had perfect control over her facial expressions and knew exactly what information they conveyed.

Lawrence drooped his head respectfully.

He understood now what sort of merchant one had to be to walk the path of gold.

Eve trimmed a piece of high-quality sheepskin parchment, wrote the letter, then sprinkled sand on the wet ink to dry it. As she waited for it to set, she readied horsetail twine and red sealing wax.

Confirming that the ink was dry, she rolled the parchment, sealed it with molten wax, and secured it with a length of the twine. The letter was complete.

It cost enough to prepare such a thing that despite it being but a single letter, no merchant could ignore it.

Eve said that she hoped to do business with Lawrence again sometime, and he felt as though he could believe her.

“If all goes well, I’ll depart this town just after midday tomorrow. I’ll be

heading south by sea, bidding this cold country farewell for a while."

"I'll see you off by way of thanks, then. It may be my last time to see you before you're quite the merchant prince."

As Lawrence lightly held the proffered letter up, Eve nodded with a bitter smile. "I'll be resting up for the journey today. If you come in the evening, you should be able to enjoy the food the servant prepares."

"And if I come while the sun's up?"

Eve's smile was equivalent to a normal person's expression of surprise.

Her smile hardened for a moment, but at length she folded her arms and sighed. "If I'm the only one in the house…yes, well. Perhaps I shall treat you to a demonstration of my skill."

Back in Lenos, the first time Lawrence had properly exchanged words with Eve, she had claimed to have confidence in her own charm.

And now it seemed that was no lie.

Eve spoke in a soft tone entirely worthy of the nobility she had once been, its hoarse, aristocratic timbre tickling Lawrence's ear.

Col gaped at Eve, his mouth wide open.

When she acted like that, it was easy to believe she had once been a noblewoman.

"Pork and beef may not be the only things getting cooked. I'll need to be careful."

"Heh. Well, if your companion's mood has improved, all three of you should come."

"We shall. Thank you for the letter," Lawrence answered. Eve nodded and gave a little wave, then slowly closed the door.

No merchant ever waved to their counterpart upon parting. The gesture must have been directed at Col, who was still diagonally back from Lawrence.

Lawrence carefully tucked the letter into his coat, then glanced back.

Perhaps not surprisingly, he saw Col looking somewhat wistfully at the now-

closed door.

“She’s quite an interesting person, eh?” asked Lawrence as he began walking, which brought Col back to the present, and he hastened to follow behind.

“Um…y-yes, she is…”

“Still, she’s the one who gave me this,” admitted Lawrence, pointing to the cheek where Col’s special salve had been applied. Col seemed not to understand what Lawrence meant.

Finally the words’ meaning penetrated his head, and Col looked back at the house with disbelief on his face.

“We had a bit of a quarrel, and she struck me with a hatchet handle.”

“…I…see…”

“She’s got an unexpected side to her, and that’s why you can’t let your guard down. Just as the scarf around her head conceals her beauty, her beauty conceals something quite terrible.”

Col’s eyebrows arched up. Perhaps he just could not quite grasp what Lawrence was saying.

“You saw Holo’s anger last night, didn’t you? The truth is, Eve nearly killed me.”

“Wha—!” Col raised his voice in surprise.

It was true that upon her first meeting with Col, Eve had appeared very kind indeed, which no doubt made it difficult to imagine that she had enough shrewd, coolheaded nerve to put any bandit to shame.

Although Lawrence was trying to teach Col that people often had hidden sides and that he had to keep his wits about him, Col’s face was very serious, and he sank into silence.

He was a good, honest lad, and for him to doubt anyone at all was not in his nature.

Lawrence was musing upon this when Col suddenly looked up at him with such a look of extreme consternation on his face that Lawrence couldn’t help

but ask, “What’s the matter?”

Evidently, Col was often like this.

He was clever, but as long as he had no control over his facial expressions and the words he spoke, he would never make a good merchant.

Instead, he would make an excellent member of the clergy, so it wasn’t really a problem.

“It’s true, then…that to survive in the world, one must be like her…,” said Col, head drooping in frustration.

He seemed to accuse himself, like a young knight cursing his lack of effort upon losing a joust.

But Lawrence did not know why Col was so affected.

How was his near murder at Eve’s hands connected to surviving in the world?

Maybe it was the fact that he had been forced to find a way to survive despite the threat to his life.

Lawrence was mulling it over, but then Col resumed speaking, and he decided to listen to the boy.

“Of course, I don’t just accept the teachings of the Church, either, and even back in the village there were hard times…and naturally I think that sometimes you can’t just look at one thing, and even I know the world is an unforgiving place. But still…”

As he walked, Col looked at his feet.

By contrast, Lawrence’s gaze was turned up to the clear sky.

Such was the extent to which he had no idea what Col was saying.

“Look—” Lawrence was about to try to get the story straight when Col suddenly looked up.

“B-but, I don’t—I don’t think you’re in the wrong, Mr. Lawrence!”

Lawrence could not help but widen his eyes at the boy’s urgent ferocity.

“…Qu-quite. I was simply going to say that I have no idea what you’re talking

about and perhaps ask you to clarify.”

At this, Col’s face went suddenly blank, and he then reddened and looked down.

Lawrence scratched his head, tilting it in confusion.

He did not understand.

He did not understand, but as Col seemed not to want to discuss the matter, Lawrence decided to change the subject.

“In any case, we should return to the inn before we make our way to the Jean Company.”

Col nodded silently in response to Lawrence’s words.

“So that’s what he said.”

Claiming that if she removed the blanket, the smell from the salve that still lingered on her body would escape and cause her nose to fall off, Holo remained under it with only her face exposed. “Is that so?”

“Would you have understood what he was on about?”

Once Lawrence had returned to the room, the dozing Holo soon awoke. Whereupon she sat up like usual, her head cocked in a queer expression. She seemed physically uncomfortable, and Lawrence soon realized the reason.

Despite not being able to even properly sit up in the morning, the pain she’d felt then had disappeared so thoroughly she could barely remember it.

“That’s quite the medicine,” she said.

Thus it was that Holo decided to come along on the visit to the Jean Company.

However, they couldn’t very well go there immediately. She smelled so bad that she—along with Lawrence—would have to bathe first.

Their current topic of conversation, Col, had gone downstairs to arrange the hot water.

“I suppose I cannot blame you for failing to understand. ’Twould be like asking a butcher about fish,” said Holo, sitting atop a pillow as she yawned hugely.

Lawrence considered heaving another sigh at being made fun of yet again, but at this point, he had no intention of putting on airs and so capitulated quickly.

“At this point, I’ll readily admit that I’m the slow one. But having admitted that doesn’t suddenly give me any new insight. I still don’t understand.”

But even when Lawrence raised the white flag, Holo simply stared, tears welling up in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Lawrence asked, whereupon a bitter smile slowly appeared on her face.

“Heh. Perhaps it is I who’s the unusually kind one.” She twitched one ear.

“What do you mean?”

“When you act so humble, I cannot very well laugh at your clumsiness.”

“…”

Regardless of how he should have answered, Holo seemed satisfied with the pained way he bobbed his head.

She grinned her usual malicious grin, showing her teeth. “Still, I suppose it would be hard for you to understand, as you already know the truth of the matter. Can you really not imagine what an outsider might think, watching what transpired between you and that vixen?”

Her malicious grin offered a clue to the correct interpretation of her statement. Merchants turned a profit based on their ability to correctly read people’s dispositions; thus Lawrence could not refuse this challenge.

Above all, the direction of the correct interpretation had already been made clear.

Lawrence considered his conversation with Eve from Col’s perspective.

She had struck him with a hatchet handle and even threatened his life, which Holo had raged at Eve for with terrible fury—and when Col had heard about this, he seemed deeply troubled, blushing scarlet with embarrassment.

“Oh.” A possibility occurred to Lawrence, a bitter taste suffusing his mouth.

Yet the bitterness was not distasteful; it was akin to a tart ale.

A bitterness at which he couldn’t help laughing.

“Heh. You’re quite the lucky one, eh?” asked Holo, pleased.

Her smile came from the fact that she knew full well that Col’s misunderstanding would never come to pass.

Lawrence brought his hand to his head again and heaved a sigh. He supposed that such misunderstandings did happen from time to time, but still—to think that he should find himself in a position to be thus miscomprehended! He couldn’t help but smile ruefully at himself.

“He thinks that I had an affair with Eve, which ended in a lovers’ quarrel. I never would’ve imagined it. That’s why he was going on about not thinking I was ‘in the wrong.’”

He wanted to say something about having an affair with *Holo*, but he was quite sure he would be risking his life to make such a joke.

“That vixen’s a female, and I’m a female, and you’re a male. If we’re speaking of conflicts that have come to blows, there can really be only one answer, can there not? That all of this fuss was actually over nothing more than gold is stranger by far. My price was sixty of those golden pieces, was it not? Honestly, I will never understand the human world,” declared Holo, exasperated.

And indeed, when Lawrence thought back on how he had struggled for her sake, he felt extremely ill at ease.

But she was still Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu.

And she’d long since seen right through him.

“Still, your actions were the least understandable of all. Coming to see me off, of all things—what a total, utter fool,” said Holo, burying her amused face in her pillow.

And yet her eyes never left Lawrence.

Given her words and her actions, Lawrence could hardly be angry with her, nor could he look away.

His shoulders slumped as if to accentuate his defeat, and he lightly stroked Holo’s cheek.

“Is that all?” she asked quietly under his hand, closing one eye and twitching her ears happily.

Lawrence braced himself for a joke of some kind but then realized that Holo would surely be angry if he took her that way.

And yet he could not help looking around the room a little bit, despite knowing full well that nobody else was there.

He took a deep breath.

And then, just like in Lenos, he brought his face closer to Holo.

However, unlike in Lenos, just when he was so close to Holo that he could count the hairs of her eyebrows, there was a sudden knock at the door, at which Lawrence jumped in surprise.

“I brought the hot water!” echoed Col’s voice throughout the room.

He held the door open with his back as he carried the washtub in. It had to be heavy, and the steam that rose from it had collected on his face, covering it in droplets of water. There was no question the boy had labored mightily on Lawrence and Holo’s behalf.

What reason could there be for him to be angry at such a boy?

Still standing beside the bed, Lawrence smiled benevolently. “Good job,” he complimented.

Still, an unpleasant sweat ran down his back.

The moment the knock on the door had come, Holo had made a truly vicious expression.

Had her ears been twitching because she had heard Col’s approaching footsteps?

“What’s the matter?” Col asked.

While Lawrence’s serene expression had been perfect, the mood in the room could not be changed so quickly.

Col’s face looked a bit doubtful, but Lawrence feigned ignorance as best he could.

Holo was probably grinning atop her pillow behind him.

But the most irritating part of all of this was not Holo's enjoyment of Lawrence having blundered into the trap she'd set for him.

Lawrence put his hand to his left cheek, pretending to scratch an itch.

"I had them make it quite hot, so if it's too warm, I'll fetch some cold water," said Col, putting down the tub and placing two washcloths in it.

How much more pleasant travel would be, Lawrence mused, if he had an apprentice as thoughtful as Col.

"I understand. Thank you, Col."

"No, I'm the one who forced myself along on your journey. This is the least I can do."

His guileless smile made Lawrence muse that it would not be a bad idea to treat him to something tasty for dinner.

If Holo were to give Lawrence the same treatment, he reckoned he would be bankrupt within a month.

"Well, then, I shall help myself to the hot water straightaway. I can hardly believe how well this salve worked, but still, 'tis rather hard on my poor nose," said Holo as she climbed out of bed, at which Col seemed taken aback.

It appeared he truly did not find the odor of the salve unpleasant at all.

"Aye, 'tis good and hot. I'll douse myself in it before it turns lukewarm."

Holo plunged her hand into the tub and swirled the water around. It was still steaming energetically, but because the room was rather cold, the water was probably not as hot as it seemed.

"Ah, yes. If you're not careful, you'll catch cold," said Lawrence, and Holo took one of the washcloths, wrung it out, and lightly tossed it in his direction.

Catching it, he felt its damp warmth. Holo was right; it would be best to wipe himself clean sooner rather than later.

As the thought occurred to Lawrence, he went to remove the cloth from his right cheek, when he noticed Col, a short distance away, looking down

uncomfortably.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, though there was no need to, as Col seemed to have mustered the courage to speak.

“E-er, I’ll just…be outside,” he said, finishing his words with a forced smile.

He was obviously apprehensive about something.

As he was going out into the hall, he even gave Lawrence a significant look, as though Col had been entrusted with a deep and serious secret. Lawrence now knew all too well what the boy was surely thinking.

At the *klunk* of the closing door, Lawrence looked at Holo, who was wringing the other washcloth out with a serious expression.

“If he’s in such a state, your talk with the vixen must have been friendly indeed.”

The reasoning behind Col’s serious expression went something like this.

For Col to have mistaken Lawrence and Eve’s past conflict as a lovers’ quarrel, Lawrence and Eve must have appeared to be quite close.

However, Lawrence knew full well that if he were to actually be involved with Eve, it would only amount to a loss for him.

“He looked at me like he was promising to keep my secret forever.”

Holo glanced up, her face softening. “Heh-heh-heh. When he looked at me, it was as though he felt some deep pity.” Squatting down, she brought her knees together and rested her chin atop them. “You’d have more charm if you were a bit more like him.”

Not immediately replying to the statement, Lawrence peeled the cloth from his face.

A ginger touch to his cheek revealed that the swelling had gone down considerably, and he felt essentially no pain.

The medicine had been so effective that he found himself wondering if there might be a profit in it somewhere.

“Well, you know what they say—a bit of vermilion turns everything red. I’ve

spent so much time around you that all my charm's gone."

Lawrence wiped his cheek vigorously with the washcloth. Wiping his face with a cloth soaked in hot water was an indescribably pleasant sensation.

Holo followed his example, scrubbing her neck with the wrung-out washcloth and twitching her ears.

She seemed a bit surprised upon looking at the color of the cloth after giving her neck a once-over.

"'Tis true, and whoever said a bit of vermilion turns all red was wise indeed. After all, your face is *always* red."

Lawrence wiped his face again with what portion of the washcloth was free of the salve, and once he was clean, looked at Holo. "Not so much recently, though, no?"

"And whose mouth would say so?" inquired Holo, seemingly taken aback. Though he knew he was being provoked, Lawrence could not help but sulk a bit.

But when he saw Holo's mouth curl into a smile, he knew he had fallen into a snare.

"You claim otherwise, then? Well, since that boy's so considerately left us alone…," said Holo, rinsing her washcloth in the tub and wringing it clean before standing up.

Then she tossed the cloth at Lawrence and quickly stripped off the robe that covered her upper body.

Caught unawares, Lawrence was unavoidably startled.

Holo turned to him and put a hand on her shoulder. "Care to wash my back?" she offered flirtatiously.

While Holo thought nothing of showing her naked body, she was aware that the experience was different for Lawrence.

It was outrageous for her to capitalize on his sense of propriety.

Lawrence gave that excuse to his flustering, then balled up the washcloth and tossed it back at Holo.

The medicine Col made worked miraculously well.

While Holo still felt a bit shy of recovered, given how little time she'd had the salve on, it was almost unbelievably effective.

The swelling in Lawrence's face was mostly gone, as well.

But since Holo had reached out and pinched his cheek, asking, "And just how are *you* feeling?" he could not deny that the redness had increased.

He thought he was going to see stars, but while she was being awfully spiteful, Holo also seemed frustrated and angry, so he made no counterattack.

Evidently, she could not stomach his tossing the washcloth back at her.

This didn't seem to be an act, so she must have actually wanted him to wash her back.

From that perspective, he was the one in the wrong, and so Lawrence felt himself to be in a difficult place.

"So, what's this? The trading company you're about to visit is involved in some foolish scheme?"

They had ventured out along the most obvious street and were headed for the riverside marketplace. A marketplace implied stalls, and Lawrence had been prepared for Holo's begging.

But he had not imagined that she would bolt for the very first stall she sniffed.

He followed her with his eyes, feeling something like a faint headache, and saw that the stall had heated stones atop of which sea snails sizzled and frothed as they were cooked in their shells.

"We're going to figure out whether they *are* scheming, but according to Eve, there's a good possibility that they are."

Whether or not Holo was actually listening to him, her eyes shone as she wordlessly prodded him.

As she wasn't going to take no for an answer, Lawrence decided to avoid a pointless struggle.

The shopkeeper was busily shaving skewers with a knife, and when Lawrence

presented him with a blackened copper coin, he adroitly took a skewer and extracted the snail meat from a shell with it, and in no time at all, he had three snails skewered.

Lawrence ordered three servings of the same.

Just as he was thinking it was rather cheap, it turned out the salt that gave the shellfish their delightful flavor cost extra.

Lawrence grinned and gave some choice words of complaint to the shrewd shopkeeper, then asked where he could find the Jean Company.

He had to get his information fee's worth.

"Even if we go, will they really talk to us?" asked Col after taking one of the skewers and giving his thanks.

Naturally, Lawrence had already cleared up the boy's misunderstanding about Eve.

"That's just as Eve said. It'll depend on my skill."

"I do not like our chances," mocked Holo, but given Col's nervous smile, Lawrence decided to play the clown.

"Still, though," continued Holo as she looked at the opposite side of the river, "how different things can be, even in the same city."

The inn in which Lawrence and company were staying was situated at the mouth of the Roam River, on the north side of the port town of Kerube, which was divided into north and south by the river that ran through it.

The marketplace and grander buildings were unsurprisingly concentrated along the river's edges, and while they were moderately lively, this was only in comparison with the inn's neighborhood.

A bit past the wide avenue that ran along the river was the strikingly pebbled riverbank itself. Since this was the river's mouth, the bank was quite broad, with the water some distance away. Looking to the right, there was the sea, and even Lawrence's nose could smell the salt. Across the river was the south side of the town, and before it, constructed on the river's great delta, was the largest marketplace in the great port town of Kerube.

As to the question of which of the town's three sections was the liveliest, it went without saying that it was the delta. And as to where the grandest buildings were, they were in the south.

The north side of the town, where Lawrence and his companions were, seemed rather drab by comparison.

Owing to the haze of distance, it was difficult to make out the number of ships berthed in the southern harbor and the amount of goods piled in the delta marketplace, but it was clear that across the river there was more of everything.

It sometimes happened that different places within a town were possessed of entirely different ambiences. And when that town was divided by a river, it might well seem like two separate towns entirely.

"If we cross over, there should be a Rowen Trade Guild house."

"That was where merchants from your hometown all gather, aye?"

"Yes. However, since the place has a sort of branch office in the delta marketplace, I've never actually been to the central house."

Lawrence pointed to the delta town that lay right where the river met the sea.

While the term *town* might not have been precisely accurate, to a merchant the place was a city unto itself.

Even from this distance, the overcrowding of the salt wind–grayed two-and three-story buildings there was obvious.

It felt like the clamor of the marketplace might be audible at any moment should the wind pick it up and carry it over the river.

If Holo lowered her hood and listened, she would probably have been able to make out the bustle.

"Seems rather more lively over there. Shall we go and see?"

"I imagine you're only interested in the food," said Lawrence, eliciting a childish scowl from Holo.

It had a purposefulness to it, as though Holo was saying she was wholly

confident she would be able to get him to take her later anyway.

Lawrence's shoulders slumped as if admitting he knew she was right, and he started walking but suddenly stopped.

This was because Col had been quiet for some time. He was staring out at the shoal.

"What's wrong?"

Col spun around in response to Lawrence's question. "Ah, er…nothing…"

"Nothing?" queried Holo, plucking Col's skewer away and eating one of the two remaining snails on it. "Lies are a poor reprisal." She made as though to plunge her fangs into the last morsel, her eyes on Col. "Still you have nothing to say?"

Lawrence had heard that many animals treated their young severely; apparently wolves were among their number.

He couldn't help but think it.

However, Holo was just as bad when it came to honestly saying what she wanted.

Lawrence still clearly remembered the town they had arrived at after they first met, where Holo had shown such unsightly lust for the apples there. Lately she had entirely ceased putting on such displays, but her persistent prodding of Col now was probably rooted in her memories of her past self.

"Uh…um…" But Col was not only young, he was also a boy. "I'd like to go to the delta."

Unlike Holo, he looked smartly up at Lawrence when he said so, which was rather splendid.

Lawrence took the skewer out of Holo's hand and gave it back to Col. He added, "He's better at this than you," to Holo and got a kick for his trouble. "You're not my apprentice, so I plan to fully repay you for the salve you made for us. Your preparedness was audacious."

Strange words, but the phrase fit Col perfectly.

Maybe it was just his basic honesty or his personality, but left alone, he seemed likely to become more apprentice-like than a real apprentice.

But Lawrence knew the world did not always reward such generosity, and that knowledge made him worry for the boy. If he wanted to take advantage of Col, how easy it would have been.

“…I understand,” Col replied with a confused smile.

He probably saw that Lawrence and Holo were worried, hence his answer.

Such things happened all the time in comical tales.

A master would set his faithful, obedient slave free, saying, “Go now, live your life free—you need no longer serve anyone.” And the slave would then faithfully keep his master’s order, living the rest of his life without ever serving another.

So was the slave who kept his master’s last order until the very end truly free?

Col’s confused smile may well have come from him imagining himself the same as the slave in the tale.

“However, let me just say this. It will not be right away. Merchants are a hasty lot, and if I don’t take care of this business first, I’ll be useless.”

“I understand. But…,” said Col, scratching his head bashfully. “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Lawrence let himself imagine what it would be like if Holo were so honest, but he didn’t look at her.

He could see her well enough in the corner of his field of view with her unamused smile.

“I’ve come to this town three times, but the truth is, I’ve never been to the delta,” said Col.

“Because of the ferryman’s fee?”

Col nodded.

If he couldn’t afford the ferryman’s fee to get to the delta, Lawrence wanted to know just how he had managed to cross the Roam River.

Given Col's persistence, he might well have bound his clothes about his head and simply swum across.

"So, I've never been to the south side, but what about you?" Lawrence asked as the three of them walked, once Col had finished eating his shellfish.

"The south side is…The town is very beautiful there."

The hesitation in the boy's statement came as he looked around briefly, then lowered his voice.

It was true, then—even a glance at the riverbanks made the difference between the two halves very clear.

It was probably related to pagans being more numerous on the north side, while the south had more merchants and orthodox church members.

Among merchants, the ones from the southern side were far wealthier, and money tended to gather in places where there was already concentrated wealth.

"But there is more almsgiving on this side," said Col.

"Is that so? I'd heard that the north side had more people from the north country, but still."

"I believe so. There are many people here who were born in Roef. But even if that weren't so, I have the feeling that people on this side are simply kinder."

Lawrence scratched the tip of his nose and thought about how to reply.

The conflict between north and south was as delicate a subject as the conflict between wolves and humans.

"That's because the harsher the climate, the kinder the people who live there," Lawrence answered, at which Col smiled widely.

Though Col was broad-minded enough to travel alone into the south to study Church law, he still took innocent pleasure in hearing northern people favorably compared to southerners.

Lawrence was struck anew by the fact and felt as if he could understand why the biggest center of commerce in the city was situated on the river delta.

It was a buffer zone between the north and the south.

Alternatively, it might serve as neutral territory.

“But—” Col spoke up as Lawrence continued walking and looking out at the delta. “The people in the south always seem very happy,” he said considerately.

Lawrence was a bit surprised, and his expression slowly shifted to a smile. “It’s easier to make wine in warm weather, after all.”

“Oh, I see.”

There was no mistaking that given a few years, Col would turn into a pleasant young man.

Lawrence could think of nothing that would refute the obvious prediction.

Neither, he was sure, could Holo.

As they walked, she smiled happily and held Col’s hand, which may well have been an investment on her part.

The itchy notion was both amusing and a source of jealousy, and just as it occurred to Lawrence, Holo shot him a sidelong glance from beneath her hood.

“If you dally too long, I may just switch over,” her malicious smile said.

Lawrence stroked his beard and sighed.

The sigh came instead of the words he’d very nearly spoken, only to stop short in his throat.

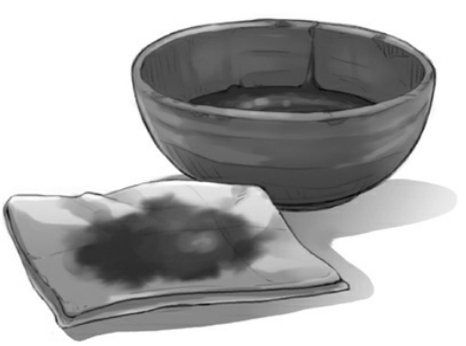
And here I hadn’t planned on giving more bait to a fish I’d already hooked.

He had wanted to give Holo that retort but thought better of it.

Had he indulged in this game, there was a real danger he would actually lose to Col.

Wondering what she could possibly do with such a young lad, Lawrence took a deep breath of the cold air and laughed silently to himself.

CHAPTER TWO



Chapter Two

Out of the Roef Mountains flows the Roef River into the Roam River, which in turn empties into the Winfiel Strait.

At the highest headwaters of the Roef River is the mining town of Lesko. Where the Roef and Roam Rivers meet is Lenos, and where it meets the sea lies the port town of Kerube.

And when it came to the copper goods that arrived from upriver at the end of the long journey in Kerube, there were certainly enough trading companies to handle the trade.

As a result, Lawrence had a certain preconception, along with a fair bit of anticipation.

So when he arrived at the Jean Company, he couldn't help but feel a little deflated.

"Is this the place?" asked Holo, her expression belying her swallowed disappointment.

She looked like she wanted to point out that she could blow the place over with a breath, probably because she might well have been imagining turning back into a wolf and smashing it to bits.

A rectangular iron plate, which was stamped "Jean Company," dangled from the eaves, and the street-facing side of the building was functioning as a loading dock. It was there where what goods were present were loaded.

As for what the goods were loaded on or tied to, it was no shaggy-haired winter-working horse that would unflinchingly plunge through the deepest snowdrifts, nor was it a big wagon of the sort that could carry all the household goods of a small village.

There under the eaves stood a scrawny mule upon which were loaded

bundles of oat, probably meant as winterfeed. It yawned aimlessly, waiting for departure.

Col, who surely heard the words *trading company* and imagined a center of money and power, stood before the shabby shop spoiling for a fight.

“Who goes there, eh?” a portly man well past middle age inquired. He was sitting at a receiving desk at the back of the loading dock and looked up at Lawrence’s party when he noticed them standing under the edge of the eaves. There seemed to be no one else in the trading house, save for a chicken that was using the floor as a pasture and pecking at the odd fallen leaf. “If you’ve come to buy, I welcome you and gladly. But if you’ve come to sell something, well…you may have wasted the trip.”

The man did not stand, and the way his sagging cheeks drew up into a self-deprecating smile seemed, above all, tired.

At this display, Holo shot Lawrence an extremely displeased look.

The Jean Company was among those trying to buy and sell, for some unfathomable purpose, the bones of a wolf that had likely been one of her friends.

They were deserving of all her spite, and given the depth of her contempt, they should at least be a big enough company to be worthy of it—so said her glance.

Col alone seemed to mistake the old man’s tired mien for dignity.

However, it was not always the case that a company’s size and the quality of the people it employed were proportionate.

Sometimes reaching into a snake hole summoned a dragon.

“Is business as bad as that?” Lawrence replied, stepping up onto the loading dock.

Pieces of straw were scattered about on the dock’s floor, probably a remnant of the large amount of wheat that had passed through it. The scene called to mind the eaves of a farmhouse somewhere. There were goods of various kinds here and there, as one would expect of a trading house, but to a one they

seemed dingy and poor.

“Hunh. I make you as a merchant from the south. Is business good down south, then?”

In the corner, there was a folded-up set of armor.

It seemed to have been there for some time, probably as back stock, and Lawrence found in it a bit of comfort as one who had once failed badly in armor dealings.

“It’s good and bad.”

“Here it’s terrible. The worst,” admitted the old man, raising his hands in a defeated gesture.

Holo and Col followed Lawrence onto the loading dock, and they glanced about curiously.

When Holo suddenly lifted up some of the accumulated straw on the floor, two chicken eggs rolled out.

“Ah, so there were eggs in there, eh? The hens lay them all over, and I never find them all. I’ll have to gather them later…and yes, there’s been a huge drop in the chicken population this year. It’s damned quiet. Used to be this time of year the roosters and hens were lively as anything.”

“Because of the cancellation of the northern campaign?”

“Right. With no people, there’s no money, and when people don’t move, their bellies don’t empty. The price of farmed goods is dropping, along with things like barrels and buckets, and the armor that used to fly off the shelf goes nowhere, and to top it off, the price of wine just goes up and up.”

“Huh?” muttered Holo, sounding perplexed.

Behind the desk, the pudgy old man shrugged clumsily. “When there’s nothing to be done, what’s left to do but drink?”

Holo seemed entirely satisfied with the explanation.

“So, what news of profit does this merchant bring with two lumps in tow?”

“Lumps?” grumbled Holo, irritated. She probably would not be able to pass as

a nun the way she usually did. Thinking that he would need to talk it over thoroughly with her later, Lawrence set the jab aside with grim resolution.

“I’d like to speak to the master of the Jean Company.”

“Well, that’d be me.”

Lawrence had guessed as much and nodded, unsurprised, stepping forward and placing the letter he had gotten from Eve on the desk.

“Oh, my apologies. So you’re acquainted with the Bolan Company, eh?”

“The Bolan Company?” Lawrence had been unaware that Eve had set up her own company and was a bit taken aback.

He had never met anyone for whom the term *lone wolf* fit as well as it did her.

However, when he said so, the master of the Jean Company did not as much as make a strange face.

Instead, he looked as though he thought Lawrence was making an offhand joke. “She may do business all alone without so much as hanging up a sign, but anyone who casts as wide a net as she does is a serious trading company, don’t you think?” posed the master, looking for agreement as he opened Eve’s letter.

Lawrence had no way of guessing just how influential Eve was, but there was not a single good reason to let this man know how recently he had come to know her.

Lawrence nodded and smiled vaguely, at which the man drew his own conclusions and smiled back.

“Mm, Kraft Lawrence, is it? Ho-ho. Never thought a man would come in here with a letter from that wolf of a woman. How’d you get her over the fire, I’d like to know.”

A moment ago the man seemed like the feckless master of a drab little company, but with his left eyebrow raised as he stared piercingly up at Lawrence, he seemed much more formidable.

However, he surely was not trying to intimidate Lawrence or inflate his own impression. He was simply very interested, and this was probably no more than the face he showed to any other tough merchant.

Lawrence revised his opinion of his opponent and relaxed, letting the enjoyment of meeting another interesting merchant show on his face.

“That’s a secret.”

“Bwa-ha-ha! I’ll bet it is! So…if I might ask, what brings you to…” His eyes ran over the letter as he talked.

Lawrence did not fail to notice the master’s cheek twitch immediately thereafter.

Given that it dealt with the story of the bone of a wolf that had been revered as a god, a normal merchant would have given a hearty laugh and poured some wine.

But the Jean Company master’s shoulders only shook with a chuckle of remembrance as he rerolled the letter and tied it closed. “I see. It’s been some time since anyone’s been interested in this story. And if you went to the trouble of getting Eve Bolan to send you, well…I guess you’re in earnest.”

“Embarrassing though it is, yes,” answered Lawrence with a smile. The man returned the smile, which seemed to be made of two different expressions mixed together.

The first was surprise that there was a merchant who would hear this story and take it so seriously. The other was befuddlement at being begged for details, after all this time, when long ago he had tried to get others to listen, but none would.

But the smile soon disappeared from the man’s face.

“Still, you must be quite a man to go to the trouble of getting a letter from that wolf just to come hear a silly tale like this.”

“It’s not as though we want a seat on the council. We want to know what can be done, not how we might seem.”

“You’ve come to my company, Kraft Lawrence, and that was the right answer. I ought to introduce myself properly. I’m the master of the Jean Company, Ted Reynolds.”

That was the name written on the Jean Company account ledgers that had so

worried Lawrence and company on the way down the Roam River.

From the name, Lawrence had imagined a younger man, but in reality, he was easily twice the age Lawrence had envisioned.

“Jean was my father’s wife, you see. He was a devoted husband.”

“My goodness.”

“Though the name made his trade partners shiver in fear, so maybe he was more henpecked than devoted,” said the man, holding up a single finger and closing one eye, pretending nobility and smiling.

While the joke felt out of place, it did give the man a strange charm.

Lawrence realized he could not let his guard down.

“But you’ve come to ask me something even stranger.”

“Indeed. People do many strange things in this world,” said Lawrence.

“That’s the truth. Hunh—ah.” Reynolds lifted himself reluctantly out of his chair. “Wait just a moment,” he said before disappearing behind the desk farther into the building.

The chickens remained, pecking at the fuzzy edges of Col’s sandals.

Col frantically tried to shoo them off, but the chickens were merciless.

Amused, Holo watched the exchange between Col and the chickens for a while but eventually bared her teeth at the chickens.

The flightless birds immediately chose flight over fight.

“Sorry to keep you waiting—oh, my.” In no more time than it took the shed feathers of the scattered chickens to fall to the floor, Reynolds returned carrying a wooden box.

It did not take a sharp-eyed merchant to guess what had happened.

“My apologies. My chickens just can’t resist anything fuzzy.”

“It’s the cold season, after all. We’ll have to hide our fingers,” Lawrence answered, at which Reynolds laughed heartily.

“Wah-hah-hah! I don’t even want to imagine it! If they start pecking at my

hangnails, I'll throw them all into the pot, along with the chicks hatching tomorrow!"

Col smiled even as he casually rubbed his fingers, and Lawrence openly directed his gaze to the box Reynolds had set on the desk.

"What's that?"

"Ah, this, you see—" said Reynolds, opening the box's lid without hesitation. Lawrence couldn't help bracing himself.

The box was packed tight with animal bones.

"This is the crystallized effort of all the people who so helpfully cooperated with the rumor that we were searching for the incredibly valuable remains of a lonely mountain village's god."

The roundabout, grandiose statement perfectly conveyed a sense of exhaustion with the subject, but just how serious the man was, Lawrence did not know.

Of course, if he was lying, Holo would tell him later.

"Are they real?"

"If only. Take a look around this trading house—can't you tell? I didn't buy these bones up out of greed, but now my shop's on the verge of collapse."

That he was nearly ruined was clearly a lie. At the very least, the shop was acting as a relay for goods coming down the Roam River, so it had to be making more profit than it appeared to be.

Still, Lawrence doubted the appearance of neglect was itself a lie.

The man's eyes shone with childlike inquisitiveness. "Why would you care about this folly now?"

"Eve asked me the same question. These two were born in the north, you see."

"Mm…," intoned Reynolds, his eyes opening slightly wider. He had the face of a man who had been terribly mistaken. "I see, so…ah…I was a bit rash. Please don't think poorly of me. I didn't mean my bitterness over this foolish tale as an

insult to your deity," said Reynolds, rubbing his nose and spreading his palms as though confessing his sins to God in a church.

The fact that he had understood so much upon realizing that the two were born in the north proved how close the region was to the Roef Mountains.

And Lawrence could tell Reynolds respected the people from the north.

"In that case, I'm quite willing to cooperate with you. The truth is, this tale is an absurd one indeed." Reynolds was able to change the conversation's mood in a flash.

The moment he spoke, the neglected surroundings of the dingy trade house faded away, and it felt as though they were in the grand hall of the town council.

"Up in the mountains of Roef, there remain many legends the Church cannot overlook. Some of them are nearly impossible to believe, but others are difficult to doubt. I don't know what region you're from, but it was said that the remains of a wolf-god lay in a certain village, and I lived in a place that seemed likely."

"Was it the village of Rupi?" Col interrupted.

His face was so serious that it was hard to imagine he had been on the verge of tears a moment ago because of chickens pecking at his sandals.

"Yes. If you know that name and you're chasing this tale, you're either very lucky to still be alive, or you've seen the unfairness of the world with your own eyes."

Col had told them how Rupi had been taken by missionaries with swords and many people had been killed.

At Reynold's words, Col nodded, his fists clenched.

"And you there next to him, miss…Merchants can't take riches to the grave, but they can take their memories, so I don't want to ask why you say you hail from the north but are dressed as a nun of the Church," said Reynolds, letting a cynical smile twitch across one half of his face.

Holo, too, smiled slightly—she understood that the wish to experience only pure, beautiful things until heading to the grave was itself a folly to be laughed

at.

“So, then, about the god of Rupi. I suppose it was the year before last, around the end of summer. Back then the missionaries and mercenaries were gallivanting all over the northern mountains and plains. Stories of this or that befalling this or that village were not uncommon. Among them, though, was a tale seized on by a trading company I was close with. Or perhaps I should say, they couldn’t help but seize on it.”

“The Debau Company, yes?”

If Lawrence let the man think they had come to him knowing nothing, he might well lie either to make a better tale or just to deceive them.

So to prevent that, Lawrence showed that they were not entirely ignorant.

Reynolds noticed the move and smiled. “Heh. This merchant bearing a letter from the wolf woman of the house of Bolan tells no lies. I respect her, and if she has put her trust in you, then I respect you, Kraft Lawrence, as well.” His smile was a serious one, and he seemed to be angry.

But Lawrence did not feel he had misspoken.

This was practically a ritual, a way to determine the rules of play between two merchants.

“I apologize for interrupting your tale.”

“Not at all. If I am the only one talking, I’ll never notice how long-winded I’m being. Since you’re not entirely ignorant of the situation, I should give you the important details.”

Reynolds coughed and straightened himself in his chair.

His gaze drifted to the wall as he looked back into his memory.

“There was a certain faction of the Church that for various reasons the Debau Company could not easily defy, and this faction brought them an offer. ‘Among the pagan stories we’ve gone into the mountains to investigate,’ they said, ‘there are some that are unlike the more absurd tales. They have shape and truth. And if that’s so, then you merchants who deal in everything on this earth, you should be able to go and find the shape and truth of this.’”

That he'd ventured to say it that way might well have been meant to imply that he was no friend of the Church himself.

"Just as we find alchemy mysterious and thus assume that alchemists can work miracles, it seems the men of the Church find our trading mysterious and wanting in virtue—and thus mistakenly think we can accomplish anything. But often in business there are requests we can't refuse. And those always flow from high to low."

"You're right about that," said Lawrence, at which Reynolds nodded, satisfied.

From the emperor to the palace merchant, from the palace merchant to the trade company he controlled, from the company to the branch, and from the branch manager to the commoner merchants at the bottom.

It was not rare for even goods respectfully presented to the emperor to have their origins with merchants who scraped and fought for every last copper coin.

Orders came from the top down, and goods flowed from the bottom up, and never the opposite.

"And our company is situated here at the bottom of the Roam River, which is ruled over by the great river spirit Roam. We must meet whatever comes down the river, whatever happens. Truly—"

Reynolds's sagging cheeks jiggled as though they'd sagged all along just waiting for this day, this moment.

"—We must, no matter the cost."

Lawrence nodded, looking down at the box that was so packed with bones on the desk.

Normally, even when a trading company somewhere was searching for goods, they would not be sent so very many.

But be they the bones of dog, cat, sheep, cow, or swine, the fact that this company had collected so many was because everybody in this town knew that the Jean Company was not conducting sensible business.

For it to be sensible business, someone would have had to be paying a fair price for sensible goods.

But if it was not sensible business, it was possible that money would be paid for even nonsensical goods.

And there existed the strong possibility that the Jean Company, and the Debau Company above them, might pay money for worthless bones if they thought the clergy who had given the original order would be satisfied.

And there were bones all over the place.

Making a small bet on that possibility was not a bad bet at all.

The most inconvenienced party was the Jean Company, who wound up playing bookmaker to those bets.

“And so it turned into quite a commotion, because some were saying that if the real bones were found, they would be paid a thousand, *two* thousand *lumione* for them.”

“So—” It was Col who spoke up as Reynolds paused and smiled self-deprecatingly. “—So, did you find the bones?”

Reynolds’s eyes, like pure glass beads beneath his drooping lids, showed no emotion but shifted for just a moment.

The question was a naive one and a breach of merchant conversation etiquette.

But those glassy eyes soon shifted back to ones befitting an easygoing shopkeeper, content to sit behind his desk and wait for customers as he watched his chickens peck at the floor.

A merchant had no call to turn angry at a naive question. Rather than show anger, he would treat the question appropriately.

Which meant that the merchant talk was now over.

“Heh. If I had, I’d be sitting at a golden desk right about now. Of course, at the time, rumors that I’d already found the bones and made a huge profit were flying around left and right, and I was attacked who knows how many times. But a little thought made it obvious. Just who had ever paid that much gold coin for something without attracting the attention of others?”

His teasing tone came from the fact that it was an absurd notion.

If this company had been paid a thousand gold coins, anybody doing business would notice the movement of money immediately.

It was the same as moving a mountain—even if you did it in the dead of night, people were going to notice come morning.

It was not something you could hide.

Col seemed to have realized that.

He nodded, crestfallen, but thanking Reynolds for answering his question.

That moment, Reynolds's eyes widened in surprise—Lawrence was laughing.

Even if the question itself had been a terrible breach of merchant etiquette, Col's polite thanks for the answer showed the kind of manners that most apprentices failed to remember even after a sound whipping.

He might have been sitting reluctantly behind the desk of his trading company, but Reynolds had a good merchant's eye; there was no doubt about that.

So he turned that merchant's eye to Lawrence.

"You've got yourself a fine apprentice there, Mr. Lawrence."

The eye of a hawk who's spotted its prey.

Surely that was no exaggeration.

"He's not my apprentice."

"Surely—!" said Reynolds, shocked, as though he simply could not believe it. When his gaze fell to Col, Lawrence immediately spoke.

"He's a future scholar of Church law. If I said he was my apprentice, I'd never be able to pass through the gates of Heaven."

Reynolds seemed not to know what sort of expression to make.

If Lawrence could ever surprise Holo enough for her to make that face, he was sure he would be able to grab her reins on the spot.

So surprised was Reynolds that he slapped his own forehead, totally at a loss. "Hrrrm! Born in the northlands, a future Church law scholar, and chasing tales

of the god of his hometown…Well, I certainly see why that wolf woman would put her trust in a merchant like you. You seem like you're on a very complicated—and truly enviable—journey."

For merchants, who were keenly aware of human connections and influence, a future Church law scholar was like a golden egg—one whose eventual value could be roughly guessed based on his current manners and personality.

You'd always want to invest in someone whose future was bright.

The notion radiated off of Reynolds, but his gaze suddenly shifted to Holo and then to Lawrence. "So then, is this one from a famous convent somewhere?"

Holo, too, would have noticed the man's predatory, hawklike gaze on Col.

But Reynolds hadn't used that gaze on Holo.

He was asking Lawrence the question either because he felt bad about ignoring Holo or he simply wanted to make small talk.

But there was no chance that Holo was going to be satisfied with such slight treatment.

So then, how best to raise her worth?

That was one calculation she could perform as fast as any merchant.

No sooner had Holo heard Reynolds's words than she hid herself behind Lawrence, clutching his clothes.

As though she were a shy maiden, fearful of strangers. As though she were claiming Lawrence as her guardian.

If merchants coveted even the possessions of the gods, then surely it was their nature to covet the things of other humans all the more.

The effect was perfect.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha!" Reynolds burst out laughing, and Lawrence realized that Holo was peering out from behind him with a malicious smile on her face.

The ineffable battle of wits had two or three layers now.

Reynolds's hearty laughter came from his realization that he had been completely fooled. "What fine guests you all are! What say you to this? It'll be

midday soon. Shall we all take a meal in celebration of our meeting?”

Lawrence, for his part, was quite happy with the proposal. Conversation with Reynolds was entirely stimulating. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d love to.”

“What wonderful fortune. I’ll summon one of my men to prepare some food. However”—here Reynolds’s gaze moved behind Lawrence to the Jean Company loading dock—“to do that I’ll need a single healthy chicken, but today it seems there isn’t a chicken to be found.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Col, at which Holo looked askance.

When they’d pecked at Col’s sandals, Holo had chased them around with a fierce enough gaze to give even another wolf pause, and now there was not a single chicken to be seen anywhere on the loading dock.

“If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to call over my neighbors for dinner,” said Reynolds with an impish, childlike smile, which Col flailed at and Holo reluctantly went to capture a chicken.

Chicken and grape wine.

Bread and salt were necessary to live, but chicken and wine were probably two of the things necessary to truly enjoy life.

And all the more so when they were an unexpected treat.

Holo dug in before even hearing Reynolds's "Please, eat," while Col ate with the proper Church manners expected of a future scholar of law.

Col was surely the only one impressed with how grand Reynolds was to treat them to such a feast after they had so casually asked him about the wolf remains.

There at the meal table, amid the easy small talk, he told them about the great commotion two years earlier, when tales of the bones were at high tide, and what happened after that.

But merchants were always looking for payment.

Lawrence was worried about that payment, but it became clear only when they were about to part ways.

Reynolds sought Lawrence's handshake. "My regards to Eve Bolan." He held Lawrence's hand firmly.

His eye was every bit that of a shrewd merchant.

Perhaps he wanted them to convey to her that he had told her customers all about the wolf remains and treated them to a good meal besides.

Perhaps he did it to strengthen his ties to Eve, thereby increasing his own business.

But while Reynolds's Jean Company might have looked shabby, it should have already been well connected to the Debau Company and its mining profits.

It was possible that Reynolds's experience with Eve had been so auspicious that he did not have very much to gain.

Or perhaps Eve was just that influential.

There were many things to worry about, but Lawrence had to be thankful for the kindness they were shown.

Lawrence returned Reynolds's grasp heartily, then put the Jean Company behind him.

While Reynolds had been reluctant to get out of his chair when they had arrived, now that they were leaving, he saw them off from beneath the trading house's eaves.

"Now, then," Lawrence murmured to himself.

He had easily achieved his goal.

But he could not deny that in all of his conversation with Reynolds, something in the twists and turns failed to add up.

The state of the Jean Company, the moment when Lawrence had given Reynolds the letter he had gotten from Eve, and even Reynolds's actions just a moment ago, when they were parting ways.

None of that led directly to the tale of the wolf remains, but the actions of merchants were often connected in surprising ways.

Deep in contemplation, Lawrence stroked his beard lightly.

"So, what shall we do?" His thoughts were interrupted by Holo.

And the moment he looked at Holo's face, he thought of the poultry they had been treated to not long ago.

The meal in question had seen the chicken thighs boiled, then covered in a sauce made from vinegar, a touch of sweet herbs, and crushed mustard seed—a true delicacy.

As to how magnificent it had actually been—well, there was still a fragment of the sweet herbs stuck to the corner of Holo's mouth.

Lawrence flicked it off with a finger, and Holo closed one eye in irritation.

But Lawrence soon realized that she was not trying to hide embarrassment at being treated like a child.

Holo had looked away and given Col a quick wink.

Col, while surprised, also looked impressed and nodded. Lawrence watched all this and sighed.

Evidently Holo had put Col to a bet as to whether Lawrence would brush the herb crumb off her mouth.

“Yes…what, indeed,” Lawrence murmured. There was no profit in her game. Lawrence pretended not to notice the wink.

“He told us everything a lot more easily than I was expecting. It’s kind of disappointing, isn’t it?”

“Oh?”

“I was sure he’d try to hide more from us,” said Col.

At Col’s words, it was now Lawrence’s turn to shoot Holo a quick glance.

Their gazes met for a moment, and they both looked away quickly.

That had to mean that Holo had realized something during the earlier conversation.

Lawrence chose his words and spoke. “…Yes, well. We’ve confirmed that the Church believed the story from Rupi to be true, which means that there was something for them to believe *in*. Which is a big step forward.”

Col nodded several times, his face serious.

However, if Holo was feeling something ominous from Reynolds’s words and actions, then things might not be so simple.

As the ensuing question would be hard to answer, Lawrence refrained from mentioning this to Col.

Col was simply too kind.

Even for someone as cynical as Holo, talking about her homeland was a dangerous proposition.

It would be best to wait for the right moment and explain things carefully.

“But there is one unfortunate thing.”

“…?” Col looked up at Lawrence, his head cocked in a question.

“Since we learned what we needed to know so easily, it looks like we won’t need to use our trump card.”

“Ah…you mean about the copper coins?”

Fifty-seven boxes packed with copper coins coming down the river had—after crossing the sea from the Jean Company—become sixty boxes, which was quite mysterious.

Lawrence suspected that this might be a vulnerable spot for the Jean Company.

If the Jean Company had tried to hide the story of the wolf remains, he could have used it to shake them down, and he had explained as much to Col.

However, because he had assumed that the simple fact of the box count not adding up would be sufficient leverage on the Jean Company, Lawrence still had not heard the reason of the discrepancy from Col.

Lawrence had not, of course, figured it out on his own.

“Well, if there’s no reason to use it, you can just tell me once our journey’s over, by way of thanks.”

Col, who *had* understood the reason all by himself, nodded, then gave a satisfied smile.

“Now then, as far as this all goes, about all we can do is go back to Eve and thank her, gathering some information along the way. And we shouldn’t hurry too much. We don’t want to be suspected of anything.”

“…Er, so…because if there’s anyone seriously following us, we’ll wind up making them think we’re up to something, right?”

The boy’s constant studiousness was certainly admirable.

Lawrence nodded. “Reynolds and Eve didn’t mind telling us all about the wolf remains because they’ve both thought the whole thing through and decided it’s nonsense. If they hear anything that gives it the ring of truth, they’ll both shut their mouths on the spot.”

“So if we keep searching for the tale too seriously, they’ll start to wonder if we’ve discovered a key that proves the story is true.”

And, of course, the key that proved the story was true was none other than Holo’s existence.

Col was well aware of that as he held up his right index finger, with an expression on his face as if he were a chef explaining that a dish's secret ingredient was just a dash of fresh herbs.

Or like a puppy proudly performing a trick he had just learned.

But he did not seem cheeky or arrogant, probably because Col himself was affecting the proud attitude purposefully.

He was just genuinely friendly.

"But the irony is that we can ask about it so easily *because* nobody believes it's true. Even though we're asking so we can figure out the truth."

"It's also a question of faith. You have to have the courage to believe you're right even when everyone around you says you're wrong."

Col nodded gravely.

"So this would be one way to put that into practice: If a priest asks God if the people can be saved and gets no reply, it's not because God is being careless, but rather the question is…?"

The future Church law scholar rang like a cast bell when struck. "The question's obvious is the reason."

This kind of calm, pleasant intellectual discussion was a bit different from what he had with Holo.

Lawrence had heard that true scholars had conversations like this from morning till night, and he felt like he understood why.

The two were walking aimlessly as they talked, and somewhere along the line, Col had begun walking beside Lawrence, which was not bad at all.

If they were to walk like this for another ten years, he was sure Col would become a dear friend.

When Lawrence thought on it, he started to look forward to the future in spite of himself.

But someone came between the two.

Someone who had been left out of the conversation—Holo.

“Seems like pleasant chat’s happening right before me,” she said, her face a bit annoyed.

Lawrence decided it was better not to try to analyze what that statement might mean.

“If there is no need to go straight back to that vixen’s burrow, then I’ve a place I’d like to go.”

“And that is?” asked Lawrence, and Holo pointed to the mouth of the river.

“That lively looking place.”

It went without saying that she meant the marketplace on the delta.

Her tail was wagging beneath her robe, and she was probably anticipating eating something tasty.

From the stimulating intellectual conversation with Col, they had returned to the usual obvious topics.

Lawrence directed his eyes past Holo to Col.

Col nodded a little hesitantly.

About half of Holo’s desire to go to the delta was for her own sake—the other half was for Col’s.

It was difficult to weigh the merits of Col’s intellectual conversation against Holo’s frank obviousness—because Holo’s words always concealed something else.

So Lawrence replied, hiding something in his words to Holo as well.

“You only ever think about food,” he said as though at a loss, at which Holo’s amber eyes rolled and her upper lip curled into a sneering smile.

“I am always thinking about *you*, as well,” she said in a higher, flattering tone, clinging to Lawrence’s arm.

Lawrence had forgotten to put an herb crumb in the corner of his own mouth, so this made them even.

Col’s face turned red, and he seemed not to know where he should look.

Lawrence could not help feeling a little bit superior, but he also could not simply enjoy it.

As to why, that was because in exchange for her performance, Holo would be expecting compensation.

“That’s because I *am* your food.” Lawrence paid his price, which made Holo grin, her ears moving enough to nearly brush her hood back.

“So you’ll loosen your purse strings a bit for me?”

Lawrence looked at Col.

“What do you think?” his gaze asked.

And when it came to this sort of verbal sparring, Col was able to answer as well as Holo. “I think you’ll need to get a room.”

“Yes, I *do* need some wine,” said Lawrence, wrapping up Col’s perfect joke.

The delta in the town of Kerube had a large reservoir in the center.

All sorts of fish, big and small, were kept in it, and occasionally groups of turtles or waterfowl would congregate there.

But no golden-haired poet would sit at the water’s edge spinning rhyme, and the words spoken there were not verses of the place’s surpassing beauty.

Because the fish in the reservoir swam in circles within nets and the turtles and waterfowl would eventually have their legs or mouths bound.

The words spoken at the waterfront were straightforward amounts and negotiations. The throats that shouted them were stout and strong, as were the hands that grabbed at the fish.

The people who came to the market to do business called the reservoir the spring of gold.

Kerube’s delta market extended two hundred paces north from the reservoir, two hundred paces south, three hundred to the east, and four hundred to the west.

This extent had been decided in the distant past, and while it seemed the delta had plenty of space to accommodate the market, as far as Lawrence had

heard or seen, it had never been expanded.

Which meant, of course, that the buildings were built to conserve land area.

The constant complaint about the overcrowding was that it was so bad you could see your neighbor's ledger.

No sooner had Lawrence and company arrived on the delta than Holo flattened her ears back.

It might have been a bit of a joke, but Lawrence didn't think it was necessarily for show.

No matter when you came, the largest market in the port town of Kerube possessed an unbelievable commotion.

"Is today a festival day or something?" a taken-aback Col asked Holo, who stood next to him as they crossed the pier after Lawrence had paid the boatman.

The delta had three docks, and Lawrence and company had arrived at the one used almost exclusively by traffic going to and from the north side of the town. So instead of the gate made from run-aground ships that was the market's most famous landmark, there was a quarried stone that had been brought ashore and simply left there.

The market proper started just past that with crowds of people standing shoulder to shoulder, none of them looking directly ahead but instead gazing intently at the shops they passed as they walked by.

"Hmm? This is hardly the only place so crowded, you know. I have been to towns where they're like this through and through," Holo said sagely, puffing up in a matter not so unlike Col himself.

"I-is that so…? The only really crowded place I've ever been is Aquent…"

"Aye. Do not worry; youth is an ignorant time. All you need do is watch and learn."

"That's surely true. After all, you said nearly the same thing to me the first time we visited a port town," said Lawrence from behind the two, putting his hand on Holo's head.

In the centuries Holo had spent in Pasloe, the world had changed enough for even a god to grow old. When it came to being ignorant about the state of the world, Holo was surely the worse offender.

But when it came to boasting, the same was true.

Irritated, she brushed Lawrence's hand off her head and glared at him threateningly. "As the contents of your coin purse are so small, aye, you must truly enjoy boasting of how much more worldly you are than I!"

"I could say precisely the same thing to you. The only large city you've ever visited is Ruvinheigen!"

Holo drew her chin in and puffed her cheeks out.

Col had been watching the exchange nervously, but this made Holo's "play with me!" attitude all too obvious.

"Only because you're a skinflint of a traveling merchant who pinches every penny, even for food. I lived a captive's life, unable to go where I wished. Or will you take me where I wish to go?"

They were difficult words, heavy with implication and calling into question their entire journey so far—if Lawrence misinterpreted even one, he could expect a sound kick in the rear.

Col seemed not to know how much of it was a joke, and he was unable to hide his discomfort.

So Lawrence answered courteously and carefully. "Merchants interpret everything through money. So as long as it costs nothing, I will cooperate with you as much as you need."

"For example?" asked Holo, giving a rare half smile beneath her hood.

She seemed incapable of hiding the absurdity of her own performance.

"For example…hmm…," said Lawrence, thinking. Holo irritatedly struck him, then grabbed his clothes and pulled him close.

"In that case, how about some pillow talk? Or do I need to make it clearer than that?"

She had made it quite clear enough, Lawrence stopped himself from saying.

Just when he thought they were fighting, the tone of the exchange had taken a sudden change, and Col's face reddened as he swallowed and watched the two.

Lawrence mused that being an actor would not be so bad.

"It's true that pillow talk doesn't cost anything. Although whenever I carry you to bed, you're always drunk."

Holo slipped away from Lawrence, a malicious smile on her face.

Lawrence prepared himself to show his best you-got-me face.

"What else can I do? Your conversation is far too boring to endure sober."

Lawrence wanted someone to compliment them on having matured so much that they could engage in such an obvious parody of their usual conversation.

"Now then, shall we have a look around?" suggested Holo, smacking her lips with relish, apparently satisfied with their joking.

What she wanted to have a look at was not the market itself, but rather the food arrayed within it.

Despite having just eaten her fill of chicken, her belly was evidently already empty.

"U-um, what food is this town known for, I wonder…," said Col to Holo, still trying to be polite to her despite being totally unable to keep up with the rapid shifts in the conversation thus far.

"Hmph. When you say it like that, it makes it sound like all I care about is food."

"Wha—? N-no, that's not what I—"

If her robe had been pulled off, no doubt Holo's tail would have been swishing to and fro as she toyed with Col mercilessly. In any case, Lawrence was not listening to Col's stumbling words as he was teased.

He started walking alone, then passed the stone that served as a gate and turned back.

“Come, hurry!”

Despite the noise of the bustling market, the clear tone of a lass’s voice would still attract attention.

A merchant who was sitting on the stone and writing something glanced at Holo, the hand on his slate going awry. Paradoxically, her slim, chaste features made it obvious she was abstaining for profit. From the perspective of an ascetic hermit, this was a grave sin.

Following Holo’s gaze led to Lawrence, which at the very least made things unfavorable.

And though the merchant soon dropped his gaze back to his slate and continued writing, Lawrence could clearly see that he could not help occasionally letting it slip past the edge of the slate, and only with effort did Lawrence hide a rueful chuckle.

“Stop your dallying! Come, now—” shouted Holo. Though it was unclear whether she was aware of the gaze upon her, she felt rushed enough that the tip of her swishing tail poked out from under her robe, and having shouted, she suddenly fell silent.

“…?”

No matter how good at acting she might have been, even the best disguise would wear thin if it was worn long enough.

And this did not seem like an act, so like the young merchant before him had just done, Lawrence followed Holo’s gaze.

And then he saw.

Col looked back, too, and clapped his hand over his mouth, glancing surreptitiously at Lawrence.

At the end of Holo’s gaze, just getting off the boat, was the familiar form of a certain merchant.

Wearing the same clothes as usual, regarding everything in the world as so many coins to be counted past sleepy, half-lidded eyes, the owner of that fearless gaze turned it upon Lawrence.

But the faint surprise that Eve evinced was surely not a skillful act, but genuine.

For around Eve were two men, both well dressed and well fed, trailed by two men also well dressed but with sinister looks in their eyes—the encounter had to be a coincidence.

The young merchant who had been sitting on the rock pondering his business noticed Eve and the others and scrambled to his feet, trotting into the marketplace as though making his escape.

An older fishmonger, standing idly beside his fish cart as he waited for his broker to show up, bowed respectfully as if he were meeting an ocean spirit.

The men around Eve seemed to regard the actions of the young merchant and the old fishmonger as completely ordinary. It was as though Lawrence were the abnormal one, and they stared at him openly, as though appraising him.

Then they sniffed, as if he was beneath their contempt.

They turned and regarded Eve as if asking what this boy's problem was.

"I thought for sure you'd headed south…but maybe sightseeing comes first," said Eve in an amused tone.

The youngest of the four men handled the payment of their ferryman's fee.

Eve did not even glance at them, instead facing Lawrence as she spoke.

She spared Holo only a moment's look, and Lawrence was sure that if he had checked, Holo's eyes would have been full of hostility.

The men around Eve murmured into each other's ears as they considered Lawrence.

"Yes, as a bit of a break from work. My wound still aches a bit, you see." Lawrence let some hostility slip into his voice as he could feel Holo's gaze boring into his back.

Eve would surely understand that much.

She narrowed her eyes faintly, and raising her hand, gave two, then three signals to the men.

The two well-fed men directed unfriendly smiles at Lawrence, and the two mean-eyed ones completely ignored the group as they passed, heading into the marketplace.

Just as in the legend from the scriptures, as they walked, the sea of people seemed to part before them.

They had to be powerful figures in the town.

Just as they walked away, Holo approached Lawrence.

“For my part, I was in the middle of resting up when that lot flushed me out. They’re big fish on the north side for Kerube,” said Eve.

“Are they merchants?” Lawrence asked, at which Eve shook her head.

“They’re not involved in buying or selling goods, but they’re awfully good at bookkeeping.”

Eve’s eyes were colored with her distaste, and in an instant, Lawrence understood exactly what sort of men they were. They probably had special privileges in Kerube.

They might have been landowners, or perhaps they controlled tax collection or fishing licensure. At the very least, it was clear that they lived in a world where simply relaxing in a chair would bring money flowing to them.

If they were making even the slightest bow in Eve’s direction, they must know how useful she could be.

Or perhaps despite their power, they still lacked a noble title.

Lawrence could not be sure, but the situation smelled highly amusing.

“If you’re interested, come to the spring of gold. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Just as Eve left, she shot Holo a quick glance.

Then her form entered the throng in the marketplace, and she disappeared—as if she could blend into or stand out of a crowd at will.

Impressed, Lawrence watched her go before a kick from Holo brought him back to the present.

“You’ve some nerve, watching another female right in front of me.”

Lawrence had heard that line somewhere before but only shrugged, not offering a proper answer. “Shall I look only at you from now on, then?” he inquired, playfully bring his face close to Holo’s and boldly touching her cheek.

An irritated Holo then immediately started walking toward the marketplace.

“Ah, Miss Holo!” Col reflexively followed her but stopped short after a step.

He looked back hesitantly. “E-er—”

“Hmm?”

“Are you not going to…?”

By which he of course meant following Holo.

Col was probably worried that by running after Holo, he was usurping Lawrence’s role.

“I am not. I think she’d like you to go with her.”

“I don’t—”

“You don’t think so?” asked Lawrence, and Col shook his head.

Even if he were released, Col surely would not try to fix his mussed hair.

Evidently, he was too busy thinking about other things to bother with it.

“I’ll admit that you’re clever, but even a bit of thought should have led you to conclude that I’ve got no leg to stand on.” Lawrence smiled and fixed Col’s hair. “It’s true that she’s angry with me. But the part where she’s quarreling with me, that’s a lie.”

Lawrence reached into the leather coin purse slung around his hip and produced a single silver *trenni*.

He then touched the coin to Col’s nose. “This should be more than enough for all the food and drink you could want. Be careful that Holo doesn’t have too much wine.”

“…”

Col seemed not to understand why Lawrence was not pursuing Holo, and he accepted the coin with a deeply perplexed expression.

“She can see right through me, you see. She knows Eve’s words have caught my interest. But she also hates Eve and doesn’t want to have to see her face.”

Col wore a look that said, “And then?” but Lawrence explained no further, giving Col’s back a little shove, adding that if he wanted to know more, he should ask Holo.

He hesitated for a moment, but he was a smart boy and walked away as he was told.

Though she had already disappeared into the crowd, Holo would surely find Col.

“Well, then.”

Eve had said to come to the spring of gold.

Lawrence understood what that meant.

He had learned that any important meeting regarding the port town of Kerube would be held by the delta’s spring of gold.

If it were held on the north side, the northerners would try to press their advantage, likewise for the south side; this was a measure against that.

If an impoverished noblewoman with her eye on becoming a wealthy merchant would go there with such powerful townsmen, it was certain to be something that any merchant worthy of the name would want to attend.

In the face of that, no possible amusement could compare.

Of course, it would have been easy enough for Holo to take Lawrence by the scruff of the neck and turn his attention back toward her, but a clever wolf like her understood the cost of doing so.

Far better for her to withdraw, thereby drawing something out of Lawrence.

And Lawrence had accepted the bargain.

He ran his hand through his hair ruefully, wishing that he could read Holo’s heart as easily as he had understood the bargain they had just struck.

No doubt Holo was at a loss herself.

“A *trenni* for sightseeing, eh?”

As he folded his arms and craned his neck, he wondered if he had gotten too brave and handed over too much money.

But at least he would hear no complaints.

Lawrence walked, heading into the market for the first time in quite a while.

He felt he had melted into the crowd quite well.

All that was left was the squalid hustle and bustle of the marketplace, humming like an army of ants.

The marketplace was a little world of its own.

Whether it was true or not, it was said that the delta marketplace was built upon countless piles driven into the sand. Most of the buildings were stone to prevent—it was rumored—the pile-supported marketplace from being washed away by the river. Lawrence could understand that much, as the nails of wooden construction would instantly start to rust and rot, but he could not help but worry that stone buildings would sink into the sand.

Of course, he had never heard of anything like that happening so far, so it had to be working.

Due to the way things were, wind would carry sand through the spaces between buildings, where it would accumulate, calling to mind the markets of desert towns far to the south.

Words carried on the wind directed him through the twists and turns of the market's center, and he arrived without incident at the spring of gold.

Around the spring, a round plaza was constructed with roads leading away from it to the north, south, east, and west.

Marking the spring's very center was a long and high pylon.

Three blackened, dried fish were affixed to the pylon, perhaps as a kind of charm, and atop it perched a single seagull.

At one spot at the edge of the spring, three sets of tables and chairs were arranged, around which stood three guards with leather chest pieces. The men carried spears nearly twice as long as they were tall.

Taking a look around, Lawrence saw that the inns and lodgings surrounding the spring all had their second-story windows left open. All the faces peering out through them seemed to be those of well-to-do merchants, perhaps among them some who had women waiting on them within and were indulging themselves a bit.

Lawrence was, of course, not so wealthy that he could indulge in spectating from an inn, so he bought an ale from one of the opportunistically positioned open-air stalls, settling himself at an appropriate distance so that he could hear the conversation at the tables.

He did not see Eve, but there were already men he recognized for who they were, sitting in the chairs, each whispering into the ears of his staff.

There was no need to bother asking anybody the topic of discussion.

No tongue was as loose as that of a merchant anticipating amusement.

Merchants who were tight-lipped when talk of profit came up were only too happy to gossip.

Just by listening to the strong spirit seller talking loudly to his neighbor, Lawrence could glean the general idea.

The man seemed to be a merchant who was stopping over during a sea voyage, but he was extremely drunk, making him harder to understand. But the gist seemed to be that there was a debate going on over whether to expand the marketplace.

Lawrence had heard similar talk when he had visited in the past, so perhaps it was a common topic.

However, thinking about it simply suggested that expanding the delta marketplace would increase the traffic of merchants and goods, which in turn would increase the taxes the town collected, so it seemed as if there would be little to discuss and that everyone would agree.

Of course, things were not so simple, so the debate went on and on—and in such cases, the interests of the people in power reigned supreme.

Lawrence brought his ale to his lips, gazing at the men at the tables with a wry

smile, wondering just what sort of greed-stained play was about to be performed.

Just then, something else suddenly caught his eye, and in that instant, the gull sitting atop the central pylon flew away.

Immediately thereafter—or perhaps immediately before—the sound of a bell ringing echoed sharply across the plaza, and the surrounding chatter swiftly fell silent.

When Lawrence looked at the tables placed at the edge of the spring, the participants in the discussion there had all risen, extending their right hands and proclaiming the beginning of the meeting.

“In the name of the great spirit of the river, Roam!”

They then took their seats, and the three guards looked up into the sky and shook their spears three times.

It was full of as much pomp as the council of wise men of the ancient empire, but it was probably necessary in order to give the meeting the authority it needed.

Lawrence could guess how often someone had tried to question the council’s authority.

If the meeting lacked the authority to set town policy, the town would quickly descend into civil unrest. It would be like a mercenary troop without a commander.

A nation was no different, which was why kings claimed their right to rule to be bestowed by God.

Lawrence took another swig of ale. “Seems like things are hard everywhere,” he couldn’t help murmuring, a wry smile on his face.

“You think so, too, eh?”

Lawrence nearly spit out his ale at the sudden, unexpected reply to his idle statement.

He hurriedly turned to face the direction from which the voice had emanated, and it was the one person he had not spied at the meeting—Eve.

“Why so startled? It’s as though you’ve something to hide.”

From behind the scarf wrapped about her head, her eyes smiled faintly.

“…Merchants keep their secrets and their coins tucked safely away in their purses, after all.”

“I’d like to take mine to the grave, if I can.”

“Quite right.” Lawrence slumped exaggeratedly, which Eve laughed at like a carefree town lass. “So, what business might you have with a gossipy traveling merchant like me?”

“Such cheek. I doubt I’ll ever forget your hands closing around my throat so long as I live.”

It was hard for Lawrence to hear.

But even the grandest general had quarreled with someone as a child and come home crying.

“And here I thought you’d be over there sitting in one of those seats.”

“That ceremony? If there was anything to be gained from that, I’d pray to God a little more often,” declared Eve, turning her narrowed eyes to the spring’s edge.

Lawrence openly regarded Eve’s profile but could not guess her real intention.

Was her talkativeness thanks to a good mood or a bad one?

If Eve were a wolf like Holo, it would surely be the latter, Lawrence thought to himself.

He heard a loud cough from the edge of the spring, which was followed by the formal declaration of the topic.

“The meeting’s started.”

Just as the liquor-swilling merchants beside them had predicted, the meeting regarded the expansion of the delta marketplace.

The man who pronounced the topic was one of the same well-dressed men who had disembarked from the boat with Eve, and he seemed accustomed to public speaking.

“It’s not quite a farce, but a meeting’s conclusion always comes from somewhere outside the participants, don’t you think?”

Lawrence’s reply to Eve was delayed thanks to a feeling not unlike envy that came over him. “…So, you’re saying they’ve entrusted their under-the-table dealings to you.”

Eve sighed and shrugged. “Not to put too fine a point on it.”

“I’m wondering why you’d bother idling around with me, then,” said Lawrence, debating whether he had let more envy than was necessary color his voice but deciding that this small amount of covetousness would be forgiven.

After all, winning the trust of powerful town officials was an almost blindingly brilliant honor for a lowly traveling merchant.

Yet the moment Eve heard Lawrence’s words, he was surprised to see her gape in apparent surprise.

It hadn’t been *that* surprising, he thought—but then noticed that Eve’s gaze had returned to the meeting.

Apparent representatives of the north and south were exchanging words, but with seemingly less vigor than they should have been, even appearing rather silly.

Lawrence looked back at Eve a moment after her surprise.

And when he saw Eve’s face, she was smiling as she had been when she looked at Col, Lawrence thought to himself—but then he thought better of it.

It was the same expression she had worn when they each put their lives on the line in Lenos, the town of lumber and fur.

“If I said it made me happy you were honestly envious, would you laugh?”

Lawrence understood the reason why her eyes were fixed on the meeting immediately before her.

He doubted there was a wolf anywhere that was honest or obedient.

“I’d laugh, all right.”

Merchants to a one spent their days hiding their true motives, always trying

to deceive one another for their own profit.

If he were to obey that near instinct, the correct course would be for Lawrence to try to read Eve's mood and see if he could get in on whatever under-the-table deal she was conducting. Envy was a secondary priority, and letting that envy show was not even a consideration.

And yet if a merchant's acquaintances were all other merchants, that unavoidably meant that they were all also hiding their true motives and trying to take whatever advantage they could.

And even a legendary hero needed a break sometimes.

So Lawrence's insensitive admission of his own envy had actually made this wolf happy.

Eve looked down in self-deprecation, and when she looked back up, her eyes were as clear as melted snow.

"I was right to spot you and call you over. The truth is, I was rather melancholy about having been summoned by that lot." Eve indicated the meeting with irritation.

"It won't make you any money?" inquired Lawrence, and even with the scarf she was wearing, he could tell her mouth twisted into a sneer.

"I played with fire in Lenos and on the Roam River, but yes, that's one of the reasons I could breathe a little easier once I entered Kerube."

A political patron. Or a backer with sufficient wealth to put her beyond the ability of local lords to arrest.

Either way, they would hardly consider Eve an equal.

Such people existed, even for traveling merchants who prided themselves on their independence.

Despite having fallen into poverty, she had a noble name and had dragged herself up from the depths, yet there was no telling how many burdens she still carried.

When Lawrence and company met her in front of the town entrance, Eve paid them proper respect, but he realized, seeing her now, that it might not have

been so simple a thing.

“I’m sort of a mercenary for them, but they’ve ordered me to do something essentially impossible. Do you know the story behind this marketplace?”

Presented with such a tale, Lawrence shook his head without a trace of pride.

“Scores of years ago, it was a group of merchants from the south who proposed the marketplace because they wanted a place to trade with the north. However, the landowners were a little short on wisdom and thought that if they sold the land, it would be a huge loss, so they bragged they would construct their *own* market. Even if it drove them into a deep debt.”

“The landholders were from the north. The moneylenders were from the south.”

Eve pushed aside her scarf and took a couple drafts of her ale, then set her cup back down. “Yes. The men over there are the sons of the ones who borrowed the money and those who lent it. In exchange for not losing the land and receiving exorbitant rent for its use, they wind up paying an equivalent amount of interest. Of course, the landowners cannot hide their irritation at this and are constantly looking for a way out.”

“But they haven’t found one.”

Eve nodded, and her eyes turned cold and appraising, as if she could count how many silver coins a human life was worth. “So, what will the second generation look for next? The answer is simple: a scapegoat.”

Eve’s face was as still as the surface of a lake.

She was certainly trying to become a merchant prince, but right now she was only a modestly wealthy trader.

She did use others—she was used by them.

Eve had been told to overturn the problem surrounding the north side, the south side, and their marketplace—which she knew perfectly well was impossible for anyone.

But she was not expected to successfully solve the problem, rather to shoulder the blame for failing to do so, thereby acting as the unlucky distraction, which would take attention off the landlords’ own grievances.

Lawrence found himself wishing, as someone once bested by Eve, for her triumph.

“Still, I don’t have a monopoly on misfortune. You saw Reynolds’s place, didn’t you?” asked Eve nonchalantly. That Lawrence’s strengths and hers were so different was surely because the oceans they had traversed were so different.

“Yes…it was shabbier than I expected.”

“Hah. At least be a little more circumspect about it. But even a place that

deals only in copper exports has its profit swallowed up by the powers that be. That's the sort of place this is."

There was no place as pitiful as one with no money and only power.

It was the truth of the world that the wealthy never quarreled.

"But I mustn't get you involved in any trouble. I'm off to negotiate, I suppose."

Eve thanked Lawrence for the ale and started to walk away.

Lawrence could not help but to call out to her receding form. "I had no problems hearing the story of the wolf remains!"

Eve looked back, her expression unchanging, then resumed her previous direction and kept walking.

But Lawrence was fairly certain that the faint smile he had detected beneath her scarf had not been his imagination.

Eve's actions had been entirely purposeful.

As though she had wanted him to call out.

Unlike the rest of the merchants, Lawrence did not watch the tables, instead continuing to follow Eve's back as she receded.

Eventually, at quite a distance from the crowd, she hailed a group of eccentric-seeming merchants who, judging by their clothes, seemed to be from the south.

And just as Eve was with the north, they were surely the merchant mercenaries working for the south.

Lawrence was sure that if he asked their names and affiliations, he would feel some sense of affinity for them, but still he could not help but cheer for Eve.

In Lenos, the town of lumber and fur, he witnessed Eve's preparedness and her willingness to risk her own life, and on the Roam River, he had to tip his hat to her thorough use of every possible method to attain her goal.

And yet when circumstances changed, she was the one being used.

Of course, in exchange for being so used, she surely profited herself.

But Lawrence thought he could understand Eve, who could so easily leave Lenos, where she had cut deeply into Church authority, and Kerube, where she was well connected to the powers that be, in order to get herself and her furs south.

She was not some hero who would cleave the world open with naught but her sword and her hand, but rather an ordinary merchant who occasionally had to sip her share of mud.

“A merchant can never play the leading role,” held a famous merchant’s saying.

Lawrence was glad Holo was not with him, he realized a few moments later.

And he was glad he had ordered ale instead of wine, he thought after peering into the bottom of the cup.

His own face was surely rather pathetic at the moment.

Holo’s rage came from the Church subjecting the remains of the wolf-god to terrible treatment in the name of missionary work, but such incidents were probably not rare.

Lawrence was not like Reynolds of the Jean Company, but he hoped he would only bring beautiful memories to the grave.

Lawrence murmured as much inwardly, then looked back at the ongoing meeting as its artificial bickering continued, and he swallowed a bitter sigh with a drink of ale.

By reputation, the delta marketplace was a captivating microcosm of the world, holding goods from scores of nations. On the winds that blew through it were carried dozens of languages, it was said.

But Lawrence could not deny that hearing and seeing were very different things, as the feeling he got on first setting foot in the marketplace was similar to the impression he had upon first seeing the Jean Company.

Goods were not piled high the way they were in markets that were only open a few days out of the year, and there were neither people visiting for business, nor hawkers trying to pry loose coins from the travelers who were stopping in

the market midway through their journeys.

The marketplace was choked with crowds, but a close inspection of the shops that were lined up revealed that establishments with actual goods on display were few. Instead, they merely hung signs for goods in amounts far exceeding what someone would need in their daily lives, and without speaking to the shopkeeper, no samples were shown.

Lawrence had wanted to try some foreign food, but the marketplace was so crowded that no space for friendly drinking and relaxation could exist. For drink, there were only a few shops selling ale and wine in bulk.

Business required an atmosphere of excitement, of vigor—not confusion and violence.

For that reason, the number of taverns was controlled, and the sights of soldiers on guard with arms on their belts were not rare.

All this meant that there were a limited number of places for Lawrence to go, which any clever person would have realized after a quick circuit through the crowded marketplace.

Instead of Lawrence finding his companion, then, it was more accurate to say that the merchant was found by her.

Reasoning that Holo and Col would be amusing themselves in their way, after having his fill of watching the town's movers and shakers perform their little farce, Lawrence arrived at a first-floor tavern in search of Holo.

Just as he was deciding whether or not to open the door, a voice called out to him from above.

"Come, you."

Lawrence did not reply but pushed the tavern's door open in a long-suffering manner.

The words that he uttered immediately upon entering the small second-floor room, containing the source of the voice that so blithely called out to him, were not entirely sarcastic. "You're certainly living it up."

"Am I? We've but used the silver coin you gave us."

There was a table and chair next to the window, but Holo sat on the windowsill, drinking.

Though she was clearly visible from the street outside, her ears and tail were exposed to the world. She was either drunk or confident that she would not be recognized.

“Using a whole *trenni* on wine without a single hesitation is simply…well, I’ll have to explain it to you sooner or later.” Lawrence picked up a small cask that had been left on the floor, empty, and took a whiff, sighing.

Having a discerning palate while also being a big eater and drinker was a bad combination.

“Where’s Col?”

There were plates that had clearly once held some kind of meat dish on the table, so perhaps he’d been sent out to buy more.

“Just what you’re thinking.” Evidently the wine was keeping Holo warm, as she seemed to find the cold air that came through the window quite pleasant.

“Honestly…don’t drive him too hard now.”

Lawrence picked up the wine cask that was on the table and sat on the little bed with which the small room had been provided.

It was a poorly made bed to be sure, but to those used to traveling like livestock in the cramped conditions of a ship, it was as fine as any royal canopy bed.

Of course, if relaxing in a room like this with a cup of wine in one hand was all most people needed to feel better once they were released onto dry land after being packed into a ship’s hold, then there’d be no need for the Church’s sermons.

Holo had probably rented the room without knowing any of this, and once she did become aware of it, she seemed vaguely uncomfortable.

“So, did you hear anything new?” she asked while facing out, her head cocked against the windowpane and her eyes closed, the breeze caressing her cheek.

She seemed to be listening to the tones of a lute that drifted in from outside

or possibly to be thinking about something.

A closer look revealed that her ears were minutely twitching in time to the sound, so it had to be the former.

“Does it look like I did?” Lawrence took a drink of the sweet wine, which was perfectly suited for relaxation.

“Aye. You seem pleased.”

Though her eyes were still closed, it was as though she could still see right through him.

Lawrence rubbed his face and smiled sheepishly. “Pleased?”

Though he was confident he had erased all traces of his conversation with Eve from his expression, Holo’s reluctantly opened eyes had a certain mean smile in them. “You’re a century too young to try lying to me.”

For a moment, Lawrence wondered if she had somehow overheard his conversation at the spring all the way from here but quickly realized that was not the case.

It was a bluff.

Lawrence put his hand to his forehead with a sigh in front of Holo, whose tail swished happily.

“Well, ’tis true I took notice of your pleased face. If you’re tripped up by such a ruse, you’ve much to learn yet.”

“…I’ll keep that in mind.”

“’Tis doubtful whether you’ll be able to fit it in that wee mind of yours,” Holo said impishly, ducking her head and grinning.

“…I see. Anyway, it’s not quite true that I’m pleased. To be honest, it’s the sort of story that makes me want strong wine rather than sweet.”

“Aye?” Holo uncrossed her legs and stood. She was slightly unsteady. The wine was probably catching up to her. “Ho…’tis a bit cold,” she said, sitting next to Lawrence and leaning against him.

Lawrence found himself thinking of the many travelers who found themselves

in a similar position after being released from their harsh sea voyages and took what solace they could in a brief tryst.

But this was Holo.

She brought her feet up and turned her back to Lawrence, leaning against him and embracing her own tail.

Lawrence felt only a small twinge of disappointment—which was probably Holo's plan.

"So, of what tale did you hear tell?"

In contrast to Lawrence's very much-occupied mind, Holo was as she always was.

If he kept dwelling on this, she'd make a fool of him.

Lawrence exhaled slightly and answered, "The dark side of this town, I suppose."

"Oh, aye?"

"Simply put, it's a matter of debt and payment, but the amount is rather enormous."

Holo gulped down her wine as though it were the morning's first water.

It was sweet enough that it could be drunk that way, but she probably should have stopped.

Thinking as much, Lawrence reached for the small cask she was holding, when — "Have you any notion of how many words I just swallowed with this wine?"

As it was, after Lawrence reached over, Holo was beneath his arm.

And suddenly, she was a wolf baring her fangs.

"If 'twas talk of money that was none of your concern, you ought to have been wagging your tail in delight. But you weren't—why, I wonder?"

Holo took another swig of wine and belched.

She then pushed the wine cask into Lawrence's still-outstretched hand.

"So, what did you discuss with that vixen?"

Evidently it was impossible to hide anything from Holo.

Lawrence grasped the cask and brought it to his own mouth, cursing his luck immediately thereafter.

Under his arm, Holo grinned.

The cask contained not wine, but goat's milk with honey—probably for Col.

If she had gone to the trouble of laying such a careful trap, he probably could have just told her the truth without rousing her anger.

Lawrence slowly opened his mouth. "…Eve, who so thoroughly got the best of us before, is being treated like a mere child here."

"Hmph."

"The town's powers that be are using her as a scapegoat. I had to tip my hat to her exploits in Lenos and on the Roam River, but here she's just a whipping boy. And it's just…"

Lawrence was worried he would be risking Holo's ire if he continued, but if he started hiding his true feelings after having gotten this far, she would surely be angrier still.

He finished with a single word.

"…Sad."

Holo said nothing and did not return his gaze.

The silence was awkward, so Lawrence kept going.

"Things happen even to a merchant like Eve. So what does that mean for me, over whom she triumphed so thoroughly? I can't help but wonder. Don't you want people who best you…to go on to further success?"

Lawrence knew that there was always a bigger fish, and he was too old to believe that he was somehow an exception to the ways of the world. He had not complained like this in many years.

However, that was not because he had somehow become stronger with age.

It was because he had learned the reality that, during the long, lonely journeys of a traveling merchant, there would be no one by his side to cheer

him up when he indulged in worry and sadness.

But now—

Lawrence smiled wryly.

She might roll her eyes or show him contempt, but at least he could call it a reaction of some kind.

It was enough—enough for him to face what he had ignored for so long and to move forward.

“Listen here, you,” said Holo.

“Hmm?”

After a moment of silence, she looked up. “Listening to you talk made me mad enough for two.”

“…I see.”

“But now looking at your face, I’m thrice angry.”

“Well, you eat enough for five, so you’ve got two left to go,” joked Lawrence, and Holo elbowed him in the ribs and sat up.

“The first is that by your reasoning, I’m a pathetic fool for being your companion.”

That made sense, so Lawrence stayed silent.

“The second is because only a pup would despair at such a foolish notion.”

“I won’t argue.”

“And as for the last—” Holo knelt on the bed, her hands on her hips as she looked down at Lawrence.

She wore a displeased expression, but he wondered why it was that he detected a trace of foolishness there as well.

He soon realized that it was not his imagination.

“…To see you turn tail and behave in a manner so unbecoming a full-grown male, when on your face…”

“…My face?” Lawrence replied, which Holo nodded at after a short hesitation.

“You speak of such weakness, and yet”—Holo looked away—“your face says you could go off on your own at any moment.”

Lawrence knew he could not laugh.

But by the time the thought came to him, it was too late, and Holo—whose cheeks were flushed with something besides wine—bared her teeth, her ears standing up.

Lawrence calmed himself and replied, “But if I looked as though I couldn’t continue on alone, you’d rail at me without mercy, would you not?”

Holo looked displeased.

And yet, after growling bitterly for a while, she sat down with a nod.

Her tail wagged grandly to and fro, and she sighed in irritation. “Naturally, I would. I’d rail at you, toy with you, tease you, and when you still followed me, I’d be entirely delighted.”

“I’d…just as soon avoid that.”

“Fool,” Holo said.

Lawrence chose that moment to pull his hand back, and soft as a cotton ball, she fell toward him.

Of course, he knew what she was angry about.

In his arms, she pouted, sullen.

“Do you want me to say I was in the wrong?”

“You are *ever* in the wrong.”

“…”

Holo was Lawrence’s traveling companion, and Lawrence was Holo’s.

It was not one or the other—the ideal was for each of them to support the other.

Lawrence was not always the one making Holo angry, nor was Holo always the angry one.

Strange though it was to say, Lawrence needed to find the courage to be a

weakling.

To admit that he needed her support.

Even if she cursed him for it.

“Still, don’t you think it’s strange?”

“Aye?” inquired Holo in his arms, not looking up.

“If that’s all true, why am I the one who ends up comforting you?”

Holo’s ears flicked up, tickling Lawrence’s cheek.

She looked up, a delighted malice in her eyes, and spoke. “Because ’tis my particular privilege, that is why.”

“Ugh…still, I suppose that’s how I like you, so it’s my own fault.”

“Heh,” Holo giggled, nestling in closer.

But Lawrence could guess where this was going.

“Hey, are you going to use Col to tease me…again…?” His words trailed off suddenly.

“When people are strong, they do not look back. And for long ages, I *couldn’t* look back. And I am tired of it.” Though she was crying, her words were not choked, and they came out easily.

Even when confessing her weakness, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu did so in grand form, Lawrence thought.

Regardless of the inappropriateness of the notion, he couldn’t help thinking it.

He respectfully stroked her small head.

“You know that I’m a coward, don’t you? I’m constantly looking over my shoulder, terrified. So don’t worry on that count,” said Lawrence, and Holo buried her face in his chest as if to wipe her tears, shaking her head.

“I hate it!”

He had to respect her, persisting in her selfishness even now.

Lawrence smiled sadly and scratched the base of Holo’s ears. “Whenever I decide something, I consult with you. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“Despite your offering to me, I hate that things are changed left and right without my thoughts being solicited.”

Perhaps she had chosen a familiar example purposely, but if that was the case, then it meant Lawrence’s feelings for Holo were essentially alms.

“So my feelings are an offering?”

“I should think one is necessary for prayer.”

Holo’s ears twitched, and Lawrence smiled.

“A prayer for what?” he asked.

“For the boy Col to come.”

It was frustrating, but he could hardly deny it.

Holo smiled and closed her eyes.

This had to be something very important to her for Holo to state her true feelings so plainly.

The most frustrating part of business was having something decided above one’s head.

During the long months and years Holo had spent as a village’s harvest god, that was how she had felt.

When the Moon-Hunting Bear came to her homelands, she had not even heard about it.

Though it concerned her, it was decided without her knowledge—the definition of isolation.

And she was tired of it.

This was probably something Lawrence needed to clearly understand, but if she waited for him to do so, there was no telling how long it would take.

He was sure that was the answer he would receive were he to ask.

“Still, ’tis quite a knack being able to pick the right time to lay a trap for you. ’Tis pleasant sometimes.”

Beside him, Holo smiled nastily. Simultaneously, her wolf ears turned toward

the hall as if detecting prey.

The meaning was plain enough, but it seemed the wisewolf was not such a boring hunter as to lay the same trap twice.

“Don’t think you’ll always be able to trick me.”

Holo showed her fangs in a wordless smile, moving away from Lawrence to sit again upon the windowsill.

Though the sweet taste of honey lingered in Lawrence’s mouth, he could not restrain the bitter smile that rose at being so easily discarded.

However, if he were to look at the door from which there came a perfectly timed knock, he would easily fall into Holo’s trap.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

The door opened to reveal—of course—Col.

“Aye, and wait we did. Where’s the wine?”

“Er, it’s right—oh, there’s enough for you, too, Mr. Lawrence.”

“You hardly needed to buy so much! Ah, ’tis such a waste.”

Lawrence couldn’t help but smile at Holo and Col’s exchange.

Of course, the biggest reason for his smile was the realization that for someone who could change her expressions and moods so easily, laying a trap for the likes of the boy was child’s play.

It was truly terrifying.

So terrifying, in fact, that Lawrence chose a piece of salty, spicy jerky, and bit into it voraciously.

“So, is there anything we can use in all this talk you overheard?” Holo had no words of thanks for Col, despite having used him as her errand boy, and spoke to Lawrence instead.

Of course, there was also the fact that he was rather impressed.

Col had skillfully used his battered cloak as a bag, which he was able to sling over his shoulder. Holo may have maliciously ordered him to go buy large

amounts of food and wine, but he had carried out the charge without difficulty.

Probably out of frustration, Holo did not deign to thank him for his efforts.

In any case, Col was such a talented lad that were he to become a merchant's apprentice, a bidding war would no doubt ensue.

"Are you listening?" Holo asked of Lawrence, who was watching Col set the food and wine on the table with admirable efficiency.

"I'm listening."

"I wonder."

"It's probably worth investigating. It seems the bigwigs of the north side borrowed the money to build the marketplace, and they're keen to pay it off. And it's gotten so bad that over at the Jean Company, where we were mistaken for powerful, crafty merchants, they've got a mule yawning in front of the eaves ready to go, and they're not even gathering their chickens' eggs."

Holo chewed a cooked shellfish.

In her place, Col spoke up. "His profits are being snatched away?"

"Yes. The Jean Company deals exclusively with copper from the Roam River region, but the profits are being stolen away by the north-side bigwigs. Which means—"

Holo washed down the shellfish with a slug of wine, then burped. "—Which means 'tis no surprise he went so angrily in for all this talk of absurd profit."

"Yes, well, that too. Also—" Lawrence brought a piece of fried, silver-scaled fish whose name he did not know to his mouth.

The last time he had given a *trenni* to Holo, she had spent the entire sum on apples.

She seemed as ignorant of the word *restraint* as ever.

"—Reynolds seemed slightly suspicious."

"Mm. Well, he is surely hiding something."

Col looked up at Lawrence's and Holo's faces in surprise. "Huh?"

“It’s not too hard to guess at what. If he were using the story of the wolf remains to hide something, then—?”

“Hiding his ears without hiding his tail, eh?” Holo analogized as she flicked both.

But their opponent was a merchant.

“There’s a saying—‘A fearsome hawk is one that hides its talons.’ I think what he was hiding was not his ears, but his horns.”

“Also, when you were parting, he gave you quite the fierce handshake, did he not?”

So she had been watching that.

Lawrence nodded, picking a fish scale out of his teeth. “When he told me to give his regards to Eve Bolan, he meant either her money, her business skill, or her connections.”

“That vixen just spent all her money on those furs. We might not know the state of her coin purse, aye, but surely there are other places from which he would borrow money,” said Holo, directing a teasing smile at Lawrence.

She was referring to Lawrence’s frantic attempts to borrow money when he himself had been on the verge of ruin.

“…Which leaves either her talent or her connections. Either way, aren’t the actors and the stage a little too perfectly matched?”

Holo gave only a thin smile and looked lazily outside.

Lawrence, for his part, ate steadily from the food on the table while Col, cask held between his hands, looked back and forth between his companions.

It was not as though they were quarreling.

Col was a bright lad.

While he didn’t usually think to doubt people, when that possibility was pointed out to him, he had a good enough head to think it through.

Essentially, from their individual impressions, Holo and Lawrence had each drawn their own sketches.

Col heard the fragments and wanted to know what sort of picture they added up to.

“E-excuse me!” Col raised his hand and stood.

No matter how strict and harsh the scholar, he surely could not fail to find this dedication charming.

It was enough to make Lawrence wonder if jealous classmates had been the ones to silence Col.

“Could…could Reynolds still be looking for the remains even now?”

Holo did not reply.

But having taken classes with strict, difficult professors, Col was undeterred. “If what Reynolds is hiding is the fact that he’s still searching for the remains, then he should have politely sent us on our way. So did he welcome us in because of Eve’s letter? If so, that would mean the reason he wanted your handshake when we were leaving was…”

Col thought.

He had no knowledge of how much talent as a merchant Eve possessed.

Which meant he would draw conclusions based on his various impressions.

How would this scene appear to Col’s eye?

“The reason is because he wants your help in searching for the wolf remains, isn’t it?”

This was just another question, and yet the impression it carried was very different.

Holo took a drink of wine from her cask and looked at Col.

Then, smiling faintly, she turned to Lawrence. “What of it?”

Lawrence waved her off as if to say, “Do you even need to ask?”

Regardless of whether or not it was the truth, it was an easy conclusion to make.

“Also, if we imagine that, then it’s obvious why Eve so readily drafted a letter

for us. Since this is Eve we're talking about, she would've known ahead of time that Reynolds wanted to cooperate with her in finding the remains. But since the story is what it is, she was careful, dodging our questions. Or she might not believe it to be true. Either way, Reynolds wants Eve's help badly. What's Eve thinking? She's as cunning as a wolf, so at first she probably turned him down because of the absurdity of the story, but then we appeared, and she thought, *What if?* But it would be unwise for her to ask Reynolds directly. So what does she do? Suddenly, some people appear right before her eyes, begging to be used."

"Aha," pronounced Holo in a voice like an old woman's, chuckling to herself.

If this interpretation was on point, it showed that Reynolds definitely thought Eve was evincing some interest in the remains.

That in turn explained the sudden change in Reynolds's attitude when Col asked if he had found the remains.

Reynolds had been surprised and dismayed—either angry at what would have been a halfhearted attempt at reconnaissance or imagining that Lawrence and company were taking their orders from Eve and acting as scouts.

They had been treated to a meal not because they had been sent by Eve, but rather because Reynolds probably thought of them as simple sheep that Eve was carefully leading about.

The obvious thing for him to do, then, would not be to engage in a lot of roundabout conversation and try to merely insinuate his true intent, but rather treat them to an easily understood meal.

So the activities at the trading company could be dismantled.

Even the most sinewy old goat could be butchered as long as one knew where to stick the knife.

"So then, what shall we do?" asked Holo in a very matter-of-fact tone.

But Lawrence got the sense that her amber eyes were tinged redder than usual.

Her anger had surely returned the instant the notion that, despite deceiving

them with its poor appearance, the Jean Company was still pursuing the wolf remains began to gather real weight.

And there was no doubt that Holo was thinking, *This time for certain*.

This time, for certain, she wanted to engage a vexing situation with her own fangs, claws, and brains. She would not let them get away with it.

This she was surely thinking.

And so she wanted her companion Lawrence's answer.

"It's obvious…" Lawrence was about to continue when he felt another gaze upon him.

Though he was keeping his mouth tightly shut, Col's feelings seemed not terribly different from Holo's.

"We'll investigate. And if there's nothing there, that's fine."

This was not one man's merchant journey.

It was not even the journey of two.

It felt quite good to see everybody's views in alignment and thereby decide on a course of action.

He could see why the nobility competed so as to lead their knight brigades into battle.

Though doing such things too often would be tiring.

Holo had once shouldered the responsibility for an entire town, and it had turned bitter.

In the end, she was never even thanked.

He realized this was the first time he had been in this position, and that when he had first met the crying, dejected Holo, he had barely managed to improvise any comfort for her at all.

And yet he quite thoroughly thought of himself as Holo's guardian, which allowed Holo to easily trip him up.

Lawrence, who must have seemed barely older than Col to Holo, hid his smile

from her.

He then took a deep breath and straightened his expression, speaking like a military commander. “Right, let me explain each of your roles.”

Col looked serious, and Holo feigned seriousness, as both of them turned their ears to Lawrence’s plan.

CHAPTER THREE

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As Lawrence finished paying the tavern bill, Col and Holo amused themselves by trying to step on each other's feet.

Col stopped to look up at Lawrence, and Holo mercilessly took the opportunity to slam her foot down on Col's.

"I win!" she exclaimed proudly while Col humbly admitted, "I suppose I lost," making it difficult to tell exactly who was the child.

Of course, it is said the older one gets, the more one returns to childhood, and perhaps that was not wrong.

"Now, then," said Lawrence, and Col and Holo, looking almost like twins thanks to their similar heights, both turned back to him. "You've memorized your roles, then?"

"Yes!"

"Aye."

Col's answer was the swifter.

Lawrence had a sudden vision of what he must have looked like as a student in the capital of learning, Aquent.

By contrast, Holo's answer was curt and rude, and she yawned loudly.

"I'm a little nervous," confessed Col.

"Don't worry. If there's one piece of advice I can give, it's that the secret to telling a lie is telling yourself that depending on how you think about it, it's actually the truth. That way you're not actually lying," Lawrence advised in response to Col's uncertain smile.

"Er…no, I'm all right. I'll make sure to gather all the stories."

The boy seemed like a young knight bracing himself for his first battle.

Lawrence patted his shoulder. “I’m sure you will,” he added.

To Lawrence’s eye, Col would mature to match as much responsibility as he was given.

He was not a mere slate-toting, chalk-dusted boy from Aquent.

He possessed the practical skills he had managed to gather after being deceived, expelled, and forced to travel.

Lawrence said he was sure Col would perform well, and it was no lie.

“So, we’ll meet again in the evening.”

“Yes.” Col nodded, his expression entirely different from when he had been trying to step on Holo’s feet, and walked off boldly.

Though his receding form was small, it bore a certain dignity.

Lawrence barely had time to wonder what his own back would have looked like at that age when he felt a tug at his sleeve.

It was Holo, and though she was hardly a working woman trying to lure in a customer, somehow she seemed even more vicious than that.

“So, shall I be off then, too?”

“Er, yes.”

Holo strode off immediately, then looked back at Lawrence, whose feet were a bit slower. “Hmm?” she queried.

She was so fond of Col, and yet when it came time to put him through hardship, she was happy to do so.

Or was it that she simply thought that highly of him?

Lawrence didn’t think poorly of the boy himself, but he found it harder to trust so completely.

“Will you really be all right on your own?” Lawrence could not prevent himself from asking.

They were on their way to the landing for the ferry headed to the south side of the town.

Since their collective had the advantage of containing three people, it would have been the height of stupidity to move in a group, so they had decided to split up to gather information.

Col would be posing as a traveling beggar and head to the north side to find out what the other beggars had to say about the Jean Company.

Holo would pretend to be a nun journeying north and head for the south-side church to determine its influence in the upper regions of the Roef and Roam Rivers.

And Lawrence would make for the Rowan Trade Guild branch in the delta marketplace to see how the Jean Company's business and the wolf remains were connected.

Both Holo and Col were more capable than he was, so there was probably no need for concern.

But Holo, with her ears and tail, was the personification of pagan faith.

Despite her being the sharpest talker and thinker of all of them, Lawrence was still uneasy at the prospect of letting her go alone.

"Perhaps—perhaps I should go with you—"

Holo was a few steps ahead of Lawrence as she began walking, cutting through the crowd.

When she looked back at him, he stopped short of continuing his statement.

"So 'tis well and good for the boy Col to go off on his own, but you haven't the conviction to let me go alone?" Her amber eyes were narrowed and flashed red.

Past her, Lawrence could see the landing for the ferry, livelier than its northbound counterpart.

"That's not what I meant, but…"

"Aye, and what did you mean?"

Even if he could rationalize this or that aspect of his worry for Holo, at its core the concern was irrational.

But more importantly, Holo was angry.

“I’m sorry,” he answered, and Holo promptly poked him in the chest.

“You fool.”

“—?”

Holo glared at him, angrier every moment, then suddenly turned away indignantly.

Lawrence rubbed the spot on his chest she had inexplicably prodded, and after a moment, Holo sighed and looked back at him. “You truly are a terribly clumsy ruler.”

“Ruler?”

“A terribly clumsy one, yes,” she repeated, and Lawrence scratched his head. “Firstly, I haven’t the faintest notion why you wouldn’t let me go alone in this situation.”

As ever, Lawrence did not understand what she was talking about. “Well, I mean…just, if something were to happen…”

“Aye, and the same holds true for Col. Listen, you—”

“A-all right…” Lawrence straightened himself in response to Holo’s sudden awkwardness, as if she were trying to articulate something difficult to express.

Holo turned her gaze from the riverbank back to Lawrence, and he found her countenance accusatory.

If his memory served, she was trying to hide her embarrassment over something.

“You’re the general awaiting my report, are you not? And Col and I are your hands. So if you’ll only put us each to hard use, you’d better hold our reins.”

Lawrence could see the ferry drift into view, approaching the dock as it crossed the busy river.

At the same time, he had a vague sense of what Holo meant. “Because success and wanting me to praise you are the same?”

Holo made a pained expression and looked away. So that had to be it.

And it was probably true.

He had but to praise Holo if she were more successful than Col and console her if she failed.

But if he helped Holo with her duty, Col would be the only one praised or consoled.

She was right about that, Lawrence knew, but there was still something he did not understand—and that was the reason why Holo, whose embarrassment was no act, would tell him this.

The ferry had arrived at the pier, but owing to the crowd, they had to wait in line.

Holo looked like she was making a great effort not to let her ears and tail move about too much beneath her robe. “You wish to have a shop of your own someday, do you not? If so, you’ve much to learn about using others,” she said.

“Ah—” Lawrence couldn’t help but cover his mouth.

She was right.

If he had a shop, he would have to employ other people.

Sometimes he would need to control others, and other times he would require their loyalty.

And though Lawrence was accustomed to doing so one-on-one, when it came to larger groups of people, he had never even thought about it.

“And yet you dare to take hold of my reins?” Holo put a hand on her hip and cocked her head in mock disbelief.

Lawrence surrendered, though he kept his eye on the line, which had started to move. “That’s what’s so charming about me, right?” he asked with a taciturn mien, which did not appear to give Holo any great pleasure, and she replied with her head still cocked.

“Perhaps.”

“Well, then, I’m counting on you.”

“I can still see the worry in your face, but I shall take your words for what they’re worth.”

Lawrence paid the ferryman, explaining the circumstances and giving him enough for the return trip.

“Some wheat bread would be nice for dinner.”

“If you succeed, yes,” said Lawrence.

At this, Holo left him with a smile, and the hem of her robe whirled as she hopped aboard the ferry.

The town of Kerube was divided north from south by the river, and there was no church on the north side.

That was evidence that most pagans lived on the north side, while Church adherents were more prevalent on the south side. Historically, this evidently came from the fact that orthodox merchants tended to come up from the south and thus bought land and settled on the south side of the town.

But as the north and south sides became more distinct, it became tempting to want to look at the town as a microcosm of the world.

On the north side, building heights and street widths were highly varied, while on the south side they were precisely regulated, the neat rows of buildings lining the streets. Lawrence was sure there were no bored-looking mules yawning in front of loading docks on the south side.

It was hard to tell from the north side, but from the delta marketplace, he could clearly see the towering spire that the south-side church had collected sufficient tithes to build, its height all too obviously reaching for the heavens, and within it, there in the closest place in the town to God, hung a beautiful golden bell.

Dressed as a nun, Holo was apparently going to try to collect information by claiming she was returning from the south to her homeland in the north, and asking whether her town was still under pagan control. Lawrence had carefully explained to her what sorts of questions Church people were likely to ask her, but even without that advice, Holo was more than quick tongued enough to get the information they needed.

Still, she and Lawrence had always stayed together when investigating things or formulating plans in the past, and sending her off to do it alone was a strange

sensation.

Lawrence would undoubtedly feel the same way when he got a shop and hired people to help him.

But then it suddenly occurred to him to wonder if, when that time came, Holo would be there.

"…"

Lawrence scratched his head and sighed.

If that was the sort of thing he was worried about, then perhaps *she* should be the one concerned about leaving *him* alone, he was sure she would say.

Lawrence smiled to himself, watching Holo cross the river along with all the other passengers before eventually turning his back and walking away.

His destination was the delta marketplace branch of the Rowen Trade Guild.

He was not crossing the river with Holo and visiting the main office for the simple reason that the people with whom he was acquainted were not there.

In keeping with the delta marketplace's status as a crucial trade link between the north and south sides of the town, every trade guild kept an office there to connect with traveling comrades and collect information on goods. Since buildings were regulated, guilds could not use them to compete with one another the way they did in town, but they were still constructed to best show off each guild's specialties. Lawrence could look at each one and guess which trade guild it represented.

Dozens or hundreds of merchants were attached to each trade house, all desperately competing with one another, and when Lawrence thought of this, it seemed a wonder to him.

There was that much commerce in the world, and it had yet to run dry.

Lawrence knocked on the door of his familiar-looking guild, feeling as if he were knocking on the cabin door of a small ship afloat upon a very large sea.

"Oh, now, there's a rare face." There were several merchants on the first floor of the guild house, all of them dressed for travel.

“It’s been too long, Kieman.”

Within the room and directly opposite the door sat the master of the branch. The man, Kieman, with his beautiful blond hair, had been born to trade.

His father was a prominent trader in Kerube, and thanks to that, Kieman had seen more goods from distant lands than anyone else, despite never having traveled far. His features were easily fine enough to have been a bard’s, and unlike the other merchants on the house’s first floor, who were trading wine and gossip, he bore not a single callus on his hands.

Kieman was the prototypical rich man’s son, but while it seemed that the road-dusted merchants would inevitably hate him, their trust in him was actually rather strong.

Although he was perhaps two years younger than Lawrence, unlike Lawrence, he made his living within a town.

Those who did business in a town had no need to seek skills like being able to walk all day and night without collapsing or how to do business with someone whose language they did not speak.

Kieman was seen by the traveling merchants as someone to whom they could entrust the tiny amount of temporary residence they enjoyed at the guild house.

“Indeed, it has, Kraft Lawrence. You’ve arrived this time by land, I take it?”

Perhaps no sea vessels had arrived in the past few days. “No, by ship—though it was via the river and not the sea.”

At these words, Kieman brushed his chin with the feather end of his quill pen as he looked around the room.

It was said that he had thousands of maps’ worth of knowledge of the land in his head.

Despite having met Lawrence but twice, he was searching his mind for the trade route by which Lawrence had arrived.

“I’m not on my usual route. There was some trouble in Lenos.”

“Ah, I see.”

Kieman’s smile revealed even less than Holo’s inscrutable smile.

Town merchants lived for decades in the same towns in which they were born, and in so doing, they learned all of one another’s facial tics and tells, the better to divine one another’s true intentions. As a result, town merchants were far craftier than traveling merchants. The fact of his youth made the young master of this branch office all the more imposing.

With effort, Lawrence kept his composure and produced the silver coins that were the customary offering upon visiting a trade house, then spoke.

“I saw rather an interesting show by the spring of gold.”

“Heh. An interesting show, indeed, Mr. Lawrence—most impressive. Though it’s a rather impenetrable display, even for a traveling merchant.”

Not so much as glancing at the five *trenni* that Lawrence placed there, Kieman leaned across the counter and smiled like a child let in on a secret.

“One never knows where the sting may be laid, even in a seemingly transparent conversation. Even now Chief Jeeta at the main office is out and about, trying to protect our coin purses.”

Of House Chief Jeeta, the man who headed the Rowen Trade Guild in Kerube, Lawrence knew nothing but his name, so there was a possibility he had been among the merchants Eve called out to.

Which would mean that despite Eve not living in Kerube and leading a company here, she was facing off against various leaders of trade guilds in the city before they could band together as a faction.

Was there any man whose chest did not swell at a tale of a young knight confronting a giant?

A feeling of envy rose up inside Lawrence, but while he might admit as much to Eve, he certainly would not to Kieman.

Kieman’s ability made him entirely untrustworthy.

“So there’s a sting, is there? From what I heard, the landowners of the north side are so many fish, flopping about on land.”

“Yes, they were caught decades ago and are long since dried out. But this year, the lack of the northern campaign has slowed the flow of gold. It seems necessity knows no law.”

If the money going to the landowners who lived on the north side was a royalty for the use of the delta marketplace, then it was probably collected as a tax.

In which case, if the traffic of goods and people slowed, it would translate directly to a loss in tax revenue.

But the reason the moneylenders would continue to profit while the debtors would be ruined whether or not they profited or took a loss was because the lenders would always be able to collect the same amount in interest.

“Perhaps only a passerby like me would imagine that making another loan to show compassion would turn out better in the future.”

Kieman accepted the five silver *trenni* without any particular emotion and wrote out a receipt.

For someone who kept ledgers on the comings and goings of who knew how many great sea vessels, that was all five *trenni* was worth.

Lawrence found himself nostalgic for the exaggerated pleasure of Jakob, the Ruvinheigen guild house master, at having received a donation of *trenni*.

“Not at all. Normally it would be exactly so, but unfortunately, they’re sons of men who continued to pay interest until they died, and they themselves have been paying interest since they were born. Then ten or so years ago, there was a war in the Strait of Winfiel, and over the years as they fell behind on their interest, we on the south side offered to forgive some of their debt. They’d paid enough, we said.”

“So they were stubborn.”

“Exactly so. They stubbornly paid their interest, insisting they would eventually pay back in full. For our part, if we could only expand the marketplace, it would be trivial to reclaim the interest on the debt. But they know that, and so it only makes them more stubborn. ‘We won’t let you profit from us any further,’ they say.”

Kieman shrugged as though at a loss for further words, and Lawrence quite agreed.

He felt sorry for Eve on whom this was being taken out.

Despite being fallen nobility from the kingdom of Winfiel and apparently wielding a fair amount of influence in the Roam River region, this was probably

the reason behind her throwing all that away and heading south.

She had done whatever she had to do in order to climb back up and in so doing had sunk deeper and deeper into debt.

“If only they would be more rational. As it is, marriage between the north side and south side is still difficult, to say nothing of moving one’s household.”

Kieman seemed happy to speak, but it was clear it was not out of any particular favor toward Lawrence.

No doubt he imagined Lawrence to have brought the subject up out of the idle curiosity of a traveling merchant.

But he was also probably thinking that as a representative of the Rowen Trade Guild, he could not have Lawrence going around saying things that contradicted the guild’s position.

He had been so informative as a way of explaining to Lawrence that this was the guild line and to warn him that deviating from it would bring consequences.

Not understanding this would be dangerous, but having taken notice of the fact, Lawrence now imagined he could go to any trade guild and enjoy its protection as long as he fell into line.

“I see. So that means the rumor I heard might not necessarily be mistaken.”

“Rumor?”

Information gathering was of paramount importance for a trade guild man like Kieman, and Lawrence had to smile at the way this piqued his interest far more than the five *trenni* that were on the counter a moment ago.

Among traveling merchants, betraying this level of interest always lowered one’s status, even for a tasty rumor.

“Yes, it seems the Jean Company on the north side of town is being exploited by the powers that be there.”

Of course, this was mere speculation, but the moment Lawrence spoke it, it became truth.

Kieman’s expression hardly changed.

In fact, it changed too little.

“Might I ask…where you heard that?”

He could have purposefully played dumb, but Kieman seemed to realize that Lawrence had seen through him.

His eyes turned tense.

Lawrence now had to choose his words carefully.

He tried tossing a big rock into the pond.

“Actually, there was a strange former gentry in Lenos that I…”

“…*Made a business deal with*,” he meant to say, but Lawrence didn’t finish the sentence.

While Kieman’s face made it seem like he had just heard a funny story, his elbow lightly trapped Lawrence’s clothing against the counter.

His facial expression and body language were complete opposites.

“Mr. Lawrence, you seem tired from your journey. Would you care to rest yourself inside?”

The guild house had a dining room as well as beds and fireplaces for overnight stays.

Although that was not, of course, what Kieman meant.

Lawrence’s bait seemed to have caught him a bigger fish than he had expected.

“Yes, with pleasure,” he said with an accommodating smile.

Lawrence was led into what was surely Kieman’s office, where soup that was redolent with fish was brought out.

This was not the sort of talk that called for wine, nor was a sweet childish drink appropriate.

And here in a town where travelers were constantly passing through, a savory, hearty fish soup was often well received.

“So, what is your relationship to the head of the Bolan family?”

It seemed less like a question and more like an interrogation.

Kieman had not touched his own soup.

Lawrence noticed as much, and for a moment, he wondered if something suspicious had been added to the dish.

“I am a traveling merchant, so I’m obviously not her dance partner.”

“There was a disturbance. Something about furs, was it?”

The information had either just arrived today, or a contact in Lenos had taken a fast horse and delivered the news the previous day.

Lawrence had nothing to hide and so nodded, clearing his throat once.

“We tried to complete a large business deal together, but she betrayed me at the last minute. I’ve been so frustrated about the whole affair that I came down the river to vent my spleen at her.”

“Surely you’re joking.” Either he was used to toying with others or unused to being toyed with himself.

A bit of anger crept into Kieman’s features, and it somehow made Lawrence think of a younger Holo.

“The part about the business deal is true, and I did come down the river in search of Eve. However, my goal was to ask for her aid.”

“In business?”

Lawrence shook his head. “I came across something quite strange in my travels. That happenstance led me to follow a certain silly tale.”

“A silly…tale?”

“Yes.”

Kieman rolled his eyes up as though he were gazing at the stars in the sky; then he continued. “You refer to the story of the wolf remains.”

“Yes. For you to hit upon it so soon, it must be quite a famous tale around here.”

“Famous it is, yes, but…Mr. Lawrence, is that truly what you’re pursuing?” He

seemed less taken aback than he was simply disbelieving.

Perhaps the story was such that he could not imagine why anyone would chase it.

“I can see you’re shocked.”

“No, not as such, but…” It was a pitiful excuse, as Kieman himself was well aware. “My apologies. There’s no point in hiding it. I am indeed shocked.”

“My traveling companion was born in the north. It concerns her homeland, and she desperately wishes to find the truth.”

Here in a town where north and south collided, cultural and religious clashes were daily occurrences.

The reason Lawrence gave would be, if anything, more convincing in such a place.

“I see…What shocks me, though, is not the fact that you’re chasing the story in and of itself.”

It was the same reaction as Reynolds at the Jean Company.

But the words he continued with were different.

“Rather, what I find shocking is that while having an acquaintance with Eve Bolan, you would use it to pursue this wild-goose chase of all things.”

Lawrence thought for a moment.

He tried to logically pinpoint Kieman’s thought process.

“In other words, if I know Eve, I could use her to pursue any number of legitimate opportunities,” Lawrence prompted, at which Kieman made a fine face and nodded.

“The reason I brought you back here, Mr. Lawrence, is that her name is extremely important in this town at the moment, and we’re in a very delicate position.”

“Meaning?”

If Eve’s name was important and the town’s position delicate, then the reason for that would likewise be so.

Lawrence guessed there was only about a fifty-fifty chance that his question would be answered, but it seemed he had won that bet.

“She’s using her status as former nobility to secretly cooperate with the town headmen for profit. She’s probably the only one who has a complete picture of all the interested parties. No one knows what the impact might be of a single mistake in their dealings with her. I called you back here and told you of this, Mr. Lawrence, for the same reason I spoke with you earlier.”

He was referring to the countertop conversation about the relationship between the north and south.

That had indeed not been out of the kindness of his heart, but instead an explanation of the trade guild’s thinking.

“So to hear that you’ve come here not to do business with Eve, but instead to ask her for clues to your folly of a quest—it not only surprises me, but also comes as an enormous relief.”

Kieman spoke with an amiable demeanor, but behind his words was an order: “Do not do business with Eve in this town.

“But I think you are correct to seek her advice regarding the wolf remains. I doubt there’s anyone with as much knowledge of the Roam River region as she.”

This meant that he did not mind if Lawrence wanted to go on this wild-goose chase.

It also implied that Kieman believed the tale of the wolf bones to be utter folly.

“Still, I must wonder at what history led you to do business with her. Here in this town, there are many who wish to deal with her, but she’s utterly unapproachable. I’m sure anyone who can get a favorable response from her will do well…”

Of course, he would wonder at it.

If Eve was so important, the trade guild would have to be scheming to get involved with her.

“I did nothing. She approached me, and only now am I starting to understand why.”

“Oh?”

“She ingratiated herself with the headmen, used them, profited, and then was unable to pay them back. Or perhaps she simply didn’t want to. It was none other than Eve who was clashing with the south side’s coin purse mercenaries.”

Kieman was once again surprised, and perhaps unconsciously trying to hide it, he stroked his face and nodded.

“I was truly deceived in my dealings in Lenos. I’d wagered not only the money I’d raised by selling my precious companion into hock, but also my own life. And in the end—well, the knives and hatchets came out, but the reason I think she pulled me into the deal was that by that time, the only person she could deceive and use was a traveling merchant like me.”

When he thought about it that way, that was probably also why the slave-trading house so easily lent him the money to buy the furs.

That was just how highly Eve’s name was valued.

“I see…That does seem likely. I must admit I’m rather…envious that you could ask for her help even after knives and hatchets had come out.”

Impressed at how well chosen those words were, Lawrence nodded and answered. “True colors come out when you squabble like children over a purse full of coin. I don’t know that Eve and I are friends exactly, but we do share some embarrassing memories, let’s say.”

That was not the complete truth, but it was not far from it.

Whether or not Kieman understood, he closed his eyes and nodded, putting his index finger to his temple as if thinking on something.

As someone responsible for a trade guild branch, he would not find himself involved in such brutal dealings.

Lawrence was feeling something of a mix of envy and a vague sense of superiority when Kieman suddenly looked up.

“Understood. Now, then—”

“Yes?” answered Lawrence innocently, and then—

“Eve Bolan or the trade guild—which is your priority?”

This was the very definition of being thrown from one’s stride.

For a moment, Lawrence no longer understood who was in front of him.

But that was not because of his own surprise. There was a different reason for his sudden confusion.

Kieman’s affect had changed entirely.

Lawrence felt a cold sweat instantly break out on his back.

Up until that moment, he had simply thought that they were making small talk about Eve, but he was suddenly wondering if he had been seriously mistaken.

He thought he would be able to gather some information and call it a day.

That was not the case.

“Well…the guild, of course,” Lawrence managed to answer, and Kieman looked away without as much as nodding.

His brusque manner was just as it had been when Lawrence approached the counter and put the five *trenni* down.

Lawrence had been played.

And so unbelievably easily, too.

“In that case, I’m expecting you to behave in a manner befitting a member of this guild. Human connections are assets—they are capital. And large business requires large capital,” said Kieman with a brilliant smile.

His tone was pleasant, but it had a forceful finality to it.

Lawrence should not have let his guard down.

He had completely misjudged Eve’s importance, as well.

As a result, he had been cornered by Kieman into promising to put the trade guild first.

It made Lawrence feel incredibly uncomfortable, as if he had just been forced

to sign a contract without reading it—and this feeling was no illusion.

“Eve was only just in a difficult place without anywhere to turn, you see,” said Kieman casually, as though he were making small talk.

Lawrence was quite sure that he was not merely being asked to put a good word in with Eve.

He had to expect something humiliating or at least partially so; otherwise there was no telling what they would use him for, thought Lawrence. He was about to open his mouth to speak, when—

“Mr. Kieman! Mr. Kieman!” came a voice from outside the room, accompanied by hurried footsteps.

Next there was an urgent knock at the door, and Kieman’s name was again called out.

Something had happened.

But Kieman only sipped his now-cool soup, entirely unruffled.

“But I’ve taken too much of your time. It seems I have other business to attend to, so if you’ll excuse me.”

He stood and walked toward the door.

A dazed Lawrence watched him leave, having completely lost the opportunity to speak further, when Kieman suddenly stopped and looked back. “Ah, yes—”

His manner was that of an actor required to perform constantly for a very discerning audience.

“—If you speak of this to anyone else…”

Kieman opened the door and listened to the whisper of the frantic-looking guild employee, giving a short nod without changing his expression.

Though they might lack wolf ears or tails, there are people in the world every bit the terrifying equal of the gods and spirits.

Lawrence felt it.

“…You’ll surely regret it,” Kieman finished, regarding Lawrence with a pleasant merchant’s smile.

The guild house was in an uproar, like unto a kicked hornet's nest.

Merchants were coming through the front door, approaching the first-floor counter, leaving letters, and heading back out.

At that moment, if one wanted to know what was happening in Kerube, there was probably no better place to be than inside a trade house.

But as Lawrence watched Kieman work, he wasn't thinking about the current crisis at all.

He was still preoccupied with the conversation he had just had.

While Lawrence's calm face made it seem like he was attempting to discern what was happening in the town just as all the other merchants were, inside he was full of dread.

Kieman was trying to accomplish something using Lawrence's connection to Eve. Lawrence had thought to use Eve as bait to draw information out of Kieman, but he had wound up getting snared himself.

Meanwhile, he felt as though the mood in the clamorous first floor of the trade house had changed.

Lawrence looked up and saw a familiar face peering in at him through the open front door.

It was Holo, whom he had told to meet with him back at the inn when her work was done.

"May I help you?" asked a hairy merchant who was standing next to the door, probably thinking she was a nun on pilgrimage who had lost track of her companion.

Holo seemed to consider how to answer for a moment but soon noticed Lawrence standing up from his chair.

"Excuse me, she's an acquaintance of mine."

There were many merchants who served the food and supply lines of knight companies and mercenaries, and if a group on pilgrimage were sufficiently well funded, it was not unheard of for them to have merchants that served in similar capacities.

Lawrence spoke up without any particular urgency, so the other merchants in the room simply assumed that was what he was.

Their slightly envious gazes were probably because of his being connected to such a profitable-looking customer.

The only exception was Kieman.

Lawrence felt the man's gaze on his back as he left with Holo.

Though things outside seemed unchanged, looking closer, Lawrence noticed merchants and messengers carrying letters hurriedly to and from the trade house branches, red faced and rushed.

"What happened?" Lawrence asked as they walked slowly through the lively marketplace.

"With the town suddenly in such an uproar, I can hardly leave you on your own."

"What do you mean?" he was about to reply, but as someone thoroughly involved in things, he found he could not object.

And there was no denying that they were getting involved.

"So, did *you* find anything out?" Lawrence asked, feigning composure.

Just as he thought Holo was puffing herself up in pride, she exhaled a deep sigh and shook her head. "I received but the most perfunctory answers. I thought with the abundance of charming fools like you, I'd have no trouble drawing them out, but with this sudden commotion, they simply sent me off. What is happening?"

Ignoring her baiting words, Lawrence replied only to the substantive part of her statement. "They sent you off? Out of the church?"

"Aye. I wondered if some great demon had appeared in the town to threaten the church…"

Lawrence had to laugh at the seriousness with which this statement came. "That would've been a calamity, indeed…but I do wonder what it was that involves the Church."

“Once I was cast out of the church, I thought I would try to track the disturbance, but there was such a crowd that there was naught for it—not to mention the many men with swords and spears.”

“Soldiers?”

“Aye. All I could tell was that they were carrying something precious from the river, and it seemed they went into the church. It was a terrific uproar. Indeed, and that lad who wanted to make me his bride—when was it again?—he was there.”

“Back in Kumersun.” Lawrence made a pained face, not wanting to be reminded of such things. Holo chuckled.

But if something similar to that happened now, Lawrence doubted it would be as much of a crisis.

For one thing, even if it did, he was closer to Holo now than he had been back then.

He could tell that Holo was bringing it up partially out of a sense of nostalgia.

“But what would happen to raise such a fuss?” wondered Lawrence.

“You may ask, but I have no answer. Even listening carefully to the crowds, I couldn’t make sense of it at all. I decided ’twould be better to return to you for the nonce.”

“Huh,” Lawrence murmured, trying to piece together what he had heard earlier at the trade house. “According to what they were saying when I arrived, it seems a ship from the north side was being towed by a ship from a company on the south side, but I assumed it was just talk of internal politics.”

Holo seemed not to understand and regarded Lawrence the way she did when she thought she was being teased.

“Explain it so I can understand,” her expression said.

“The north and south sides of this town are in conflict, right? But they can’t draw lines in the ocean. When the fish head north, they fish in the north, and when the fish are south, they go south. Whenever there’s fishing in rivers, lakes, or oceans, issues of territory are always a source of strife. That’s what I thought

they were talking about. You'd hardly think that a trading company in the south would be so taken by a north-side fishing vessel out on the ocean that they'd buy it up on the spot, would you?"

Holo slowly nodded, as if vaguely understanding this talk of territory.

"But for them to tow a north-side ship in and bring ashore something that required armed escort, and for that to be the work of the Church instead of a trading company, it makes me wonder if they really caught a mermaid or something."

"A mermaid?" Holo asked, her head tilted curiously.

Surprisingly, she seemed not to know what one was.

"They're a kind of legendary creature. The sea immediately next to us is known as the Winfiel Strait, but around its northern mouth is a reef where there were constant shipwrecks. And there's an old legend about them, that women with voices of unearthly beauty sing enchanted songs from that reef, causing sailors to lose their way and wreck their ships upon the rocks. And those sailors who wonder what beautiful women are doing on the wave-pounded reefs soon have their questions answered—the mermaids are human from the waist up, but below that, they have the tails of fish."

Holo listened to the story, seeming honestly impressed.

It was not as if she were unfamiliar with the sea, but somehow she seemed never to have heard of mermaids.

If Holo had not heard of them, perhaps they really were nothing but a superstition, thought Lawrence.

Holo nodded and spoke. "Human males surely are easy to fool."

It was true that old stories and legends were full of men being tricked by all sorts of spirits.

But Lawrence had sparred with Holo many times before and had a few choice words to counterattack with.

"Isn't it better to stay carefree rather than constantly being on guard for deceptions?"

Lawrence was well aware that Holo was disposed to prefer a mild sunbeam to a violent gambling den.

After flicking her ears for a few moments beneath her hood, Holo spoke in a mischievous tone. “Aye, well, we enjoy our wine as well. Still,” she continued, smiling, “have you sworn to the God of the Church not to fall into their trap and not to fall into this one?”

“Huh?”

“I’m asking if you have anything to hide.”

“Gah—” Lawrence could not help himself from muttering, as Holo had once again struck at his inability to hide anything from her.

He had wanted to organize his thoughts more thoroughly before talking to Holo, but he told her everything about his exchange with Kieman.

“You fool.”

Lawrence wanted to protest that Kieman barely seemed human, but he knew that was no excuse.

Holo’s tone as she continued seemed unconcerned. “If it was such an unreasonable demand, why didn’t you simply refuse?”

When she said it like that, it sounded almost possible, which was a terrifying illusion.

But Lawrence soon regained his composure and scratched his head.

Merchants preferred to have contracts on paper, but before committing a promise to writing, they would use a verbal contract.

And its meaning was weighty indeed.

“Dozens, hundreds of merchants are members of the Rowen Trade Guild, including some who earn thousands of *lumione* in a year. It is nothing less than an entity that could squash me without a second thought. No matter what favor they might ask of me, I cannot refuse it. Absurd, you might think—but that is part of why promises are always kept.”

Even in the Church city of Ruvinheigen, when Lawrence was facing utter ruin

and the possibility of life on a slave ship—even then he did not consider betraying the guild.

Trading companies were thus powerful allies and fearsome enemies, knights who wielded the pen and the coin.

“Hmph. Well, I suppose ’tis true that a youngster can hardly disobey a veteran.”

“You see?”

“Aye. But still, those in such position often have too much to lose and cannot risk bold moves. You wish to use your acquaintance with that vixen to accomplish something, but with others involved, perhaps they fear the trouble it might cause and thus threaten you.”

If the problem was that one tended to be controlled by various influences and implications, then someone not in that position would have been able to make a more objective judgment.

“And for those trying to hold the group together, keeping a weather eye on your underlings so they don’t make foolish mistakes is common sense. I doubt you’ve anything to worry about.”

Holo actually had held entire mountains and villages together, and so her words had a certain persuasiveness to them.

She was not some food-and wine-obsessed town lass who cried at any mention of her homeland.

“Anyway, whatever you decide, all I need do is act according to my own priorities,” said Holo, waving her hand dismissively and speeding up her walk.

Anger at her selfishness or callousness was the wrong answer.

And yet laughing it off as a joke was also the wrong answer.

Lawrence called out to her receding form. “Even if I were at the top of that list, I assume you wouldn’t admit it, would you?”

Holo stopped and looked back. “Aye. I cannot have you getting seduced.”

She flashed her fangs in a grin, and for a moment, a shock ran through him as

he worried that she might be revealed.

But when he felt that chill down his spine, it was usually not because of his surroundings turning colder—rather it was his own temperature rising.

Lawrence gave a long-suffering sigh, drawing alongside Holo, who had slowed her walk.

He took her hand and spoke. “Are we finished here? Let’s meet back up with Col.”

Holo’s face as she looked at him was unsurprisingly angry.

“That’s my line, you dunce!”

Fortunately, the return crossing from the delta to the north side cost only a single fare.

When something happened in the town, the disturbance would spread rapidly.

And if that something was across the river, the urge to rubberneck inevitably spread like wildfire.

Nearly everyone wanted to get from the north side to the delta and from the delta to the south side, so ferries going the opposite direction were completely empty.

It would have been ridiculous not to haggle the ferryman’s fare down, and with the leftover coin, Lawrence bought Holo more roasted shellfish.

Lawrence barely had time to say, “You mustn’t tell Col,” before Holo had polished them off and was looking very satisfied indeed.

If they were going to pursue what was happening in the town, it might have seemed like the best course of action would be either to remain on the delta or cross to the south side, but listening to what Holo said made Lawrence think otherwise.

As a precaution, he had not told Kieman where they were staying.

One never knew.

If Col was taken hostage, there was no telling what sort of unreasonable

demands they might make—to say nothing of Holo.

Upon returning to the inn, they were greeted by an exhausted Col, who was sprawled facedown on the table.

“Ah, welcome back…” His face twitched strangely.

For a moment, Lawrence wondered what had happened, but then he saw the cheap pickled herring and battered, blackened copper coins on the table and could more or less guess.

He must have been very popular when posing as a beggar boy to listen to town gossip.

“…I’m tired.”

“That much is obvious, but did you hear anything to match the effort?”

Holo drew close to the tired Col and with both hands rubbed the dirt from the corners of his eyes.

When Lawrence had been just starting out as a merchant, he too had slept with a face tired from too many forced smiles, the muscles twitching and moving of their own accord.

Of course, back then he had been forced to massage his *own* face.

“Er…yes. It was just as you said, Mr. Lawrence. The Jean Company should be profiting, but I heard they don’t eat proper food, and they hardly ever give to charity.”

“Which means that they might even be taking those chicken eggs to market and selling them.”

As she rubbed Col’s face, Holo got a faraway look in her eye. “Then mayhap that feast was meant to court us.”

“Quite likely. So Reynolds may well be serious about the wolf remains.”

Or it was his last wish.

According to Kieman, Eve would only secretly negotiate with someone who could make the greatest profit in that particular moment.

As long as that was her method, no one would want to approach her without

a very clear plan.

Contacting her with the claim that you would do anything as long as it expanded your business was a dangerous bet because there was no way of knowing whom she was involved with and to what end.

Which meant it was possible that Reynolds did indeed want Eve's cooperation with the wolf remains.

It fit that Reynolds knew where the remains were but had no way of negotiating with the owner and wanted to ask Eve to act as a middleman.

It was all too likely that some well-known nobleman or clergyman had the remains.

But they would never negotiate with some unknown merchant.

Who they *would* negotiate with was a merchant prince wealthy enough to have purchased a title—or true fellow nobility.

"Even from what I heard, reinforcement seemed possible."

"Meaning?"

"The church in the town we were just in, I hear, has been very bold in spreading the teachings of their God and has been inspiring their flock all along the river. That verve has reached all the way to the northern mountains, the heartland of paganism, and there gives courage to the knights fighting with pagans on the front line."

Col sat up with a start and looked straight at Holo.

In the worst case, her statement could mean that the Church's hand had fallen upon his town.

"But the northern pagans' resistance has been fierce, and since for the nonce the missionary efforts are making little progress, the Church men were warning me not to be swayed from the true path, despite the mistaken beliefs of my kith and kin."

Col looked visibly relieved, and as he slumped, his shoulders sagged, seeming to lose half their posture.

It was clear Holo had heard quite a bit of the Church's specialty—stories that were not precisely lies but left a mistaken impression upon the listener.

Holo was not so patient as to be able to happily listen to such foolishness.

As long as she was not in a foul mood, she would not tease someone about his or her town for fun.

"The Church can never appear weak in its dealings with pagans. For them to state something so close to the truth must mean their true situation is desperate. If so, considering the situation with the bishopric in Lenos, talk of drastic measures to reverse their position—such as getting the wolf remains into their hands—cannot be easily dismissed as absurd."

"Too true. When I mentioned the bones, the fools would speak of the need to take them as quickly as possible, to show the pagans the error of their ways," spat Holo, her tail swishing violently enough to cause her robe to flip up as she sat forcefully down on the bed.

Lawrence had no words for Holo and, letting a slight sigh escape, tried to put his thoughts in order.

"There's no doubt that the Jean Company is looking for the remains. And they're closing in on the location. Or perhaps it's better to say that they're getting closer to handing them over to the Church."

"And should we just go then to this whatever-'tis-called company?"

Holo's upturned glance was frightening as ever.

Lawrence shook his head at her bare-fanged statement. "Imagine what would happen if we tried to solve everything with brute force. Your true nature would absolutely come out, and the Church's rage would be roused. A pagan god in the flesh—'all ye faithful servants of God, rise and take swords in hand,' they would say."

Holo was not such a child as to say she would merely tear all who opposed them to shreds.

She understood the difference of magnitude, and more importantly, she could not fail to know that such an act would give the deadlocked Church renewed will and resolve.

“If possible, our solution should be money. In the worst case, a secret theft would also work.”

“Such childish gambits—” began Holo, but stopped herself at Lawrence’s quiet gaze.

“Enough money can easily kill a person. With money, your homeland could be stripped bare. It is not ‘childish.’”

Lawrence was a merchant, and merchants risked their lives to make money.

He knew well how difficult that was and also the power it held.

Holo grunted something that might or might not have been agreement, then looked away.

“Still, now that we’ve recognized the situation, the question becomes what we can do about it, and the answer may well be ‘not very much.’”

“…Why should that be? If this company is seeking the aid of that vixen, then we have two choices.”

“Two?”

Anticipating a display of the celebrated cleverness of a wisewolf, Lawrence turned to look at Holo, who patted Col on the head.

“We can use this fellow’s wits to threaten them.”

She was referring to the mystery of the copper coin that the Jean Company handled.

“I see,” murmured Lawrence. “And the other?”

At those words, a mysterious smile appeared on Holo’s face, and she moved smoothly toward Lawrence.

He suddenly had a bad feeling about this, not for any particular reason, but simply because of his experiences with Holo thus far.

“We do what that company wants and play matchmaker twixt them and the

vixen. We can hear the location of the wolf remains once she's been asked where they are."

There was a head of height difference between Lawrence and Holo.

When she stood directly in front of him, Holo had to look distinctly up, but it was Lawrence who felt overpowered.

"There may be some possibility of that with the Jean Company, but there's still a clear flaw there."

"Oh, aye?"

Did she have some secret plan? Lawrence wondered, but his common sense refuted it.

"Yes. What profit is there for Eve in doing that? If we ask her where the remains are, make no mistake that she'll instantly be on guard against having them stolen away. Why would she…?" asked Lawrence when Holo's provocative smile made him realize.

Her tail was wagging her irritation for just that reason.

"We need but seduce her. You're trying to fool this wisewolf, so it should be no trouble at all, nay?"

Love affairs trumped proper business deals.

This wolf already knew full well things that Lawrence had learned in his many years as a merchant.

But Lawrence didn't understand why she was speaking about it with such irritation.

Setting aside whether or not it was a real possibility, as a potential means to an end it certainly existed.

So long as they were only discussing it, there was no need for such ill temper.

Lawrence flinched a bit at Holo's smile, and Holo looked suddenly behind her.

"Col, my lad, close your eyes and cover your ears."

"Wha—?"

He hesitated for but a moment.

By this time well trained by Holo, Col obeyed her with frightening speed.

Holo gave a satisfied sigh and turned back to Lawrence. “Did you think I had not noticed?”

Her smile disappeared, and she grabbed Lawrence’s ear and pulled him close.

“Wh-what are you—”

“Even you can tell what someone has eaten by what remains on their mouth. But I can tell by scent alone. Even the slightest morsel if I get that close.”

Lawrence soon realized what Holo was referring to by “that close.”

He had listened to Eve by the spring of gold, then had his pathetic worries soothed on the second floor of the tavern.

But why was Holo angry about that now of all times? Lawrence wondered, then realized something strange—something immediately following his conversation with Eve, and now the possibility of seducing her.

And this strange roundabout talk of being able to tell what someone had eaten by scent alone.

“Ah—”

Just as Lawrence realized, Holo drew so near that he could count her individual eyelashes.

“All I can do is pray you stop being such a reckless male. I’d then spend less effort trying to teach you the difference betwixt courage and foolhardiness.”

When they had spoken by the spring of gold, Eve had drunk the same ale that Lawrence had.

Among merchants, cup sharing was not something worth worrying about.

But while that might hold true for merchants, it was not necessarily so for Holo.

“Look here, this is a misunderstanding.”

Lawrence tried to defend himself from at least that count, whereupon Holo

violently released his ear and spoke in a quiet voice.

“I am perfectly aware of that. I told you, ’tis impossible to hide anything from me.”

It had not particularly hurt, but Lawrence still rubbed his ear as he turned his gaze away tiredly.

It would have been far more charming of her to simply admit her worry—and if he said so, he would get an ear bitten off.

Also, this business with Eve was only a possibility, and the moment they would have to bet on that possibility was rapidly approaching.

Or was it just the very fact of the prospect entering their field of view that upset Holo so?

Lawrence wondered about it as Holo roused Col, who had obediently placed his head down on the table.

He thought he understood, more or less.

Holo was truly worried.

As the tale of the wolf bones took on more plausibility, her worry was no doubt turning stronger.

“In any case, what we should do now is—” Holo began with strange vigor, which snapped Lawrence out of his reverie.

Col was cleaning up the table surface in Holo’s direction.

Just as Lawrence was wondering what she was up to, Holo held Lawrence’s coin purse up, having loosened it from his waist at some point, and continued talking.

“—We put an end to this stubbornness and ask young Col for his thoughts. Unless your heart’s set on seducing that vixen, that is.”

Lawrence, of course, only slumped and sighed.

Only the finest trading companies had glass windows.

Normally they had either nothing at all or oil-soaked cloth at best.

The inn where Lawrence and company were staying was no exception, and the opened outside windows freely let in both the clamor of the town and the frigid air.

But for once, the cold wind had been forgotten.

And it was not because they were doing something so hot it let them forget the cold.

This was what it meant to be stunned into silence.

“…It can’t be…,” Lawrence finally murmured.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

That did not, of course, change the reality of what was on the table.

“…Aye, common sense is a troublesome opponent…and yet…and yet…”

Lawrence knew of many methods to cheat in business, and the more complicated they were, the more power they had.

Moneychangers’ fraud happened in the exchange markets, with their hundreds of varieties of coins, old and new, from near and far, and fraud around the buying and selling of physical wares involved either complicated machinations or deals made on intricate timelines.

Of course, there were more straightforward frauds, but in most cases, those relied on the skillful tongue of the swindler as opposed to the method itself.

This was the first time Lawrence had been so surprised by both a trick’s nature and its source.

“Er…I don’t remember the exact amount, but if they used this method and made a bit of an adjustment, they would go from fifty-seven boxes of copper coin to sixty…I think.”

Lawrence and Holo’s shock made Col’s voice a little less certain.

“No, I’m sure it would. Yes, I see. And no one would be the wiser.”

“Doubtless not. And still…hnh,” Holo muttered in frustration, pinching Col’s cheek.

Lawrence could not even manage that.

Col had discovered a mystery: Fifty-seven boxes of imported copper coin had become sixty boxes when exported.

The answer lay in the difference between packing coins in parallel stacks of similar height or alternating rows.

Either way resulted in a perfectly packed box, such that if any coins were stolen, it would be immediately obvious.

Moreover, even if there were verbal instructions to “pack coins tightly in boxes,” the discrepancy would not be noticed, and in any case, transporting perfectly packed boxes of fixed size reduced the time spent counting coins, also ensuring that if any coins were taken, they would be immediately noticed. So at a given time and place, the only person concerned with how many coins were packed in a box was the buyer receiving them.

While in transit, nobody worried about how many coins were in a box.

This was because taxes were levied by the box, as were transportation fees.

“I wonder, though—has no one else noticed this?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll agree that Col is a bright lad, but there are many bright people in the world. If you did this for years, surely you would eventually meet someone else who knows the trick, would you not?”

Ragusa, the boatman who carried the copper coins down the Roam River to the Jean Company, did the route several times a year and had been doing so for two years.

And it was true that over two years, someone would have opened up one of the boxes and looked at its contents.

But there was one important thing.

“The Jean Company is probably cutting down on the taxes and transport costs they pay and turning profit on the excess, but there’s something very particular necessary for anyone to finally realize that they are making dishonest gains.”

“Aye?”

“…Ah! The manifest!” Col’s cheek was still being pinched by Holo, but with something to think about, he did not seem to notice or mind. He quickly gave the answer with a smile, coming back to himself and looking at Holo.

Holo pinched harder on Col’s cheek, as that was indeed the correct answer.

“Yes. Only after we know the details of the export and import can we begin to suspect foul play. There is far too much volume of trade in the world to constantly suspect this kind of fraud. One can’t inspect everything.”

Even if he wanted to live cautiously, there were many things that escaped the eye.

Lawrence picked up one of the copper coins that was lined up on the table and sighed.

“Still,” said Holo, having harassed Col for a while, “this means we’ve found a weapon to threaten that company, does it not?” she added, her eyes flashing.

Lawrence debated whether to toss cold water on that, ultimately deciding that hiding it from her would only worsen things.

Disappointment was always worse when it took longer to arrive.

“Unfortunately,” Lawrence began, at which Holo’s smile instantly froze. “As a weapon, it’s rather meager.”

“Why?” She was more frightening now than when she wore her halfhearted face of annoyance.

But nothing would be solved by holding back his words. “He’s reducing the number of boxes shipped by three and profiting via the reduced taxes and transport costs. If this comes to light, the Jean Company will either have to pay penalties or lose their credibility as a trading company. But…”

“But the difference between that penalty and the profit from the wolf bones is too great. ’Tis the same as when we bought these clothes, is it not?” suggested Holo, grabbing at her own garments.

She had calmed her irritated face, perhaps because she had realized there was nothing to do but accept reality.

“That’s right. It might’ve been just the right weapon to use if they were only

chasing the wolf tale for fun.”

Holo did seem aggrieved, but she was not dejected about having lost one of their leads.

Col, who had solved the riddle of the copper coins in the first place, had gotten ahead of her on that count.

He had surely been looking forward to his knowledge being useful.

Up until a moment earlier, Holo had been pinching his cheek, but now she ruffled his hair in an elder sisterly way.

“Aye, well, that just means the problem’s a large one. ’Tis better this than something solved with the trade of a single apple.”

“Quite right. If one method won’t work, we’ll just move on to the next.”

Talk was cheap, of course.

They needed but to find something that Reynolds would weigh favorably against the wolf remains, but if such a thing were easily obtained, none of them would need to worry so.

Or perhaps, as Reynolds had been gathering stories and thereby found some hint as to the bones’ location, Lawrence and company needed to follow that example and search out more information.

If Reynolds, who did business in Kerube, had managed to find something, then perhaps Kieman had at least a crumb of knowledge.

Lawrence did not know what Kieman was planning, but it surely involved Eve, and the guild would undoubtedly ask some favor of Lawrence on that count. So as compensation for that, perhaps he could ask for information.

It seemed something was happening in the town, so it would not be possible for a little while, but if Kieman’s hand had to wait, Lawrence did not particularly mind.

If there was a problem, it had to be—

“If we’re thinking of our next move, our problem becomes this: When will Eve depart this town? Judging by what she said, it seems like she wants to free

herself from the troublesome ties she has here. She likely plans to leave and not return for some time. And if Reynolds knows that—”

“She’ll tell him what she knows, and soon.”

Time, as ever, was the enemy.

Lawrence muttered, and Holo continued speaking.

“Which means there’s naught to do but seduce her.”

Lawrence glared sharply at her—this after how angry she had been just a moment ago.

But given the circumstances, even ridiculous possibilities had to be carefully considered.

In reality, there were countless times when a missed chance would put something out of reach for all eternity.

If the bones fell under Church authority, there was a very real possibility that they would vanish into darkness.

Holo played with Col’s hair, and Lawrence stroked his beard as they both considered the possibilities.

Col likewise was surely deep in thought, but three heads were not better than two.

As precious time slipped away, Holo seemed to grow frustrated with thinking and moved away from Col and toward the bed, sitting down and fidgeting her tail out.

Lawrence watched this and looked at Col, who likewise looked back at him.

The two exchanged a sad smile, as though agreeing a short break was in order, when— “Hmph.” Holo looked up, her ears turning toward the hallway.

And this was Holo, after all, who would listen for footsteps in the hall just to tease Lawrence.

The keenness of her hearing was soon demonstrated again.

“Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Kraft Lawrence.” His name was called just as there was a knock at the door.

It was the innkeeper's voice, but why would he bother coming all the way up to a guest's room?

Without so much as needing to exchange winks, Col immediately stood and made for the door.

They had paid for their room in advance, and Lawrence had no memory of cracking any of the cups and bowls they had borrowed.

As he was thinking about it, through the opened door appeared the innkeeper, hunched over and looking furtively around. "Ah, you're still here."

"Quite. Is something the matter?"

"Yes, I was asked to give this to you."

"To me?"

Just as Lawrence was wondering what the innkeeper could possibly have for him, the man produced a sealed letter from his breast pocket.

Lawrence took it and opened it; upon the message was neat handwriting.

"Come to the Lydon Inn.…Want to discuss statues. For details, talk to the… innkeeper?" Lawrence murmured as he read the letter's contents. When he looked up, he saw the innkeeper's gaze still upon the note.

The moment his eyes met Lawrence's, he nodded decisively.

"Aha, I see. Very good, sir. Will you be traveling alone?"

Lawrence had no idea what he was talking about, but looked back down at the letter.

The last line said, "Come alone."

"Very good, sir. I'll prepare a fast carriage. Please wait just a moment."

"Er…yes," Lawrence replied stupidly, at which the innkeeper bowed politely and trotted off.

"What was that all about?"

"I'm not really sure…oh, of course. This is an inn Eve recommended to me."

Lawrence returned to the table and set the letter on it.

Holo seemed to have been sure he was going to bring it to her and got off the bed looking irritated.

“Something urgent must have come up. She’s going to quite a bit of trouble.”

“Will you be all right alone?”

Holo picked up the letter between two fingers, sniffing suspiciously at it by way of appraisal.

Given the way she wrinkled her nose at it, the letter had to be from Eve.

“I’ll make sure to seduce her well.”

“Fool,” spat Holo before repeating herself. “Will you be safe alone?”

This time Lawrence was not teasing. “If she wanted to put me in danger, there are many other ways to do it. She must have some reason for this.”

“…”

Holo closed her mouth, aggrieved, her tail flicking.

She was either worried he was going to fall into yet another trap or possibly just thought he was helpless.

Either way, the letter asked him to come alone, and he planned to go alone.

If he did not trust Eve, that would only give her cause to be mistrustful of him.

But having explained as much to Holo, he got the feeling she was still displeased.

Lawrence was at a loss for what to say, but then his savior appeared.

“It’s all right, Miss Holo. I’ll be here with you while Mr. Lawrence is out.”

No one could fail to laugh upon hearing Col’s desperate joke.

Holo closed her eyes and burst out laughing.

If Col, who was even younger than Lawrence, could manage to be so considerate, then Holo the Wisewolf could hardly fail to do likewise.

At length her laughter subsided, and she sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “So there it is, then. Seems young Col will be watching over me while you’re away.”

Lawrence gave Col a wink.

He could only be thankful for the smile he got in reply.

“Well, I’ll be off, then. If anyone suspicious comes by, don’t open the door for them. You never know—it might be a wolf.”

Holo snorted at the joke. “Without good news, I don’t know that I’ll be able to stay in my human form.”

It was nothing to joke about, but Lawrence decided to put off that conversation until later, as whatever debt the innkeeper owed Eve, it was enough for him to prepare a fast horse-drawn carriage in a manner entirely befitting of the word *haste*, and he called for Lawrence.

“I’ll give you more details in the carriage, sir.”

This made it doubtful whether the Lydon Inn was actually an inn. It was more likely a house somewhere that they were merely calling an inn.

Lawrence nodded and followed the innkeeper’s lead.

It had been the right decision to bring Col along on this journey, Lawrence thought to himself as he pictured the boy’s face when he uttered that desperate joke.

When he emerged from the back of the inn, there waited for him no jet-black coach but rather a normal carriage. The innkeeper gave Lawrence a cloak, which he pulled low over his head.

It was obvious that Eve wanted to meet Lawrence in secret, but what he did not know was how she had such influence over the innkeeper.

Even if he did owe her some debt, there was something strange about it.

That sense of apprehension only grew as they approached the building known as the Lydon Inn.

The building was down a narrow street where careless driving blocked the way in a district where cobblers and coopers worked tirelessly under the eaves, despite the chill. Like the hideout Eve had led him to before, the building was darkened with age and seemed to have seen the passing of many seasons.

Directly across the street at what seemed to be a tailor's workshop, three men worked to cut down a large skin.

Aristocrats hated labor of all kinds.

This was not a place a refined person would live.

And upon entering the craft district, Lawrence became aware of their strange gazes upon him.

Even if it wasn't surprising they'd be curious at his arrival, given that they would know the faces of anyone who came here, there was something more than just curiosity in their gazes.

If he had to put his finger on it, they seemed to be on the lookout.

"I've brought a guest."

The driver of Lawrence's carriage knocked at the door with a cane as soon as they pulled up to the building.

The informality of it was surprising, but something about the way he knocked was odd, and it was probably some kind of signal.

Before long the door opened, and from within emerged a face Lawrence was not unfamiliar with.

It was one of the mean-eyed young men who'd been with Eve on the delta.

"Inside," he said, jerking his head back after giving Lawrence an appraising look.

Lawrence couldn't shake the feeling that he'd gotten himself involved in something big, but having realized it, it was not as though he could do anything about it.

After all, being frightened wasn't in his best interests, so Lawrence armed himself with his merchant's curiosity.

He gave the silent driver a nod and got out of the carriage, then unhesitatingly reached for the door.

The weathered door suited the house, which was one step away from being completely dilapidated, but the wood it used was solid, and most importantly, it

did not creak.

When he opened the door and entered, he saw the man who'd greeted him leaning against the wall, regarding him.

No matter where a merchant found himself delivered, he couldn't help smiling.

Lawrence gave the man a pleasant smile, and the man, who wore an obvious sword at his belt, indicated a hallway with his eyes.

The walls were half-stone and half-wood, and the floor was packed earth.

The place had probably been a craftsman's workshop at one point.

As he walked farther in, his feet *scuff-scuffing* audibly on the floor, he found himself calmed by the scent he smelled—it was burning wood, which suited the season.

He opened the door at the end of the hallway, revealing what seemed to be a workshop-turned-living room. At the moment, though, it was no more than a storage space, with crates and barrels piled high and no particular sense that anyone was living there.

On the left side of the room there was a fireplace, and the area seemed to be set up to let someone pass at least a bit of time there.

"Surprised, are you?" Sitting in a chair and warming herself in front of the fire, Eve looked up from a bundle of parchment.

She looked not unlike a noblewoman reading over petitions from her land's residents, but when she looked back and revealed her face, Lawrence was a bit surprised.

The left corner of her mouth was red and swollen.

"It's cold out there. Close the door, if you would. No lock, though."

It took Lawrence a moment to realize she was joking.

It seemed unlikely that she'd fallen and hurt herself, so someone must have hit her.

"Sorry to call you out so suddenly."

"…Not at all. I'm honored to be summoned for a secret rendezvous with a beautiful woman."

Spoken with a smile, it was a bad joke.

Spoken seriously, it was the opposite.

"A secret rendezvous, eh? Well, anyway, sit. Sadly, I've no servants," said Eve, indicating an empty chair. Her gaze fell back down to the parchment in her hand before she watched Lawrence sit.

"It's a bit chilly as homes go."

Resting her left elbow on the table, Eve remained facing the fireplace as she regarded the parchment before her.

She offered Lawrence no reply.

"Still, I imagine it's nice and cool in the summertime."

"It's winter now," she replied harshly, which Lawrence smiled at.

"So much the better. It'll be warm if you get out."

At this Eve finally looked up.

Her mouth looked like it hurt, but her eyes were smiling. "Heh. Right you are. I'd love to get out; the sooner the better."

"So why here?" He left out *"Why are you locked up here?"* given the man who was undoubtedly listening in on their conversation outside the room.

Eve sighed, and setting down the parchment, she spoke. "You would hide your weapons of last resort, too, would you not?"

"…I would, it's true."

As a former aristocrat and someone even top members of guild houses like Kieman recognized on sight, Eve was probably the Kerube landowners' trump card.

Lawrence glanced at the aging parchment on the table, and from the rows of writing and formulas, he could tell it was a property transaction of some kind.

Essentially, Eve was being forced to plan the battle here, all on her own.

“Of course, the reason I’m locked up in here at sword point isn’t because of this contract. Nor did I call you out here to suggest you cross some dangerous bridge with me.”

Only Eve, who’d dragged him into a deeply dangerous deal back in Lenos, the town of lumber and fur, could make this joke.

“Still, I’m glad you let yourself be caught. If things go badly, I’ll need my bread torn into rather small pieces tonight.”

Lawrence realized they were moving from pleasant chitchat into a business discussion.

What Eve meant was simple.

Whoever hit her left cheek would also hit her right.

“The reason I called you is indeed the commotion in the town—you noticed it, yes?”

“Yes…something about the fishermen’s boats from this side of town docking in the south, was it?”

“Indeed. It’s as though God timed it. The news reached us as we were leaving the delta and returning to this side. It’s like a different town across the river. We’d be recognized, so once the rioting started we couldn’t cross. Even though our spies made it to the south side, there wasn’t time for them to return.”

This sort of talk was not especially familiar to Lawrence, who traveled from town to town, but it wasn’t as though he couldn’t understand the basic idea of a territorial dispute.

As Eve spoke, Lawrence realized why he’d been summoned.

He didn’t yet know how important it was, but his merchant’s instincts were making him sit up and pay attention—that much he was sure of.

“As I’m sure you’ve guessed, there’s information I need. I reckon you were at that delta guild house right up until the last moment. What did you hear there, I wonder?”

Eve was speaking as though she knew that Lawrence had been at the guild house.

Practically speaking, she knew that he was a member of the Rowen Trade Guild, so it wouldn't have been hard to guess he'd been there.

But given that she was bringing this up here and now, there could be no doubt that the people who'd locked Eve up were observing him.

Of course, this could also be a trap she'd laid just to make him think so.

"I know a bit."

"Even a bit is fine."

Lawrence dropped his gaze to the parchment on the table, considering how much he should hide.

But after a moment, when he looked up, he spoke openly and frankly.

"A ship affiliated with this side was brought in by a south-side vessel. I don't know the cargo, but it was worth protecting with armed guards, and it was worth bringing directly to the church."

He'd told his opponent everything he knew without asking for any compensation, and yet this was not an uncalculated move.

"…Is that hearsay?"

"My companion got quite close to the church evidently," said Lawrence, and Eve exhaled a deep breath, looked up, and closed her eyes.

She then composed herself and opened her eyes.

"So that's it, is it?"

Lawrence had been right not to lie to Eve.

She didn't have time to bargain with him just to get a bit of information.

"I'm glad you're not some stingy-talking small fry."

"Ah, but if I were a big fish, I wouldn't have to come when called."

"True enough. But when you're a big fish, the world is filled with passages too narrow for you to pass."

The odds could not have been good that Lawrence would have information about the disturbance in the town.

Even if he had been at the trading house, there was no guarantee he would have gotten the information.

Yet she'd found a way to hide her good nature and call Lawrence here, which meant there had to be another reason she'd done so.

And then the reason he'd vaguely anticipated was made clear by her words.

"So are you telling me to go down a small passage?"

"You're in a unique position in this town. You don't have any proper connections here, but you're able to have a pleasant conversation with someone that many in this town are very eager to connect with."

Eve's eyes narrowed in a smile.

As he listened to her words, the image of Kieman claiming to be acquainted with Eve flashed through his mind.

"Of course, I won't say it's free. The story was told to me by the lot that locked me up in here, and their bellies are too large for them to fit through its paths."

She waved a single page of parchment.

It was a contract, signed and stamped.

It was written in the old-style writing and involved the delta marketplace.

"I've only meager coin and goods, sadly, but I've more than enough connections and influence. It'll be a good footing for business."

"And not a yoke?" asked Lawrence, and the fake smile disappeared from Eve's face as she turned expressionless.

"…Yes, a yoke." She reached up and touched her cheek, then looked at her fingers, probably checking for blood. "Aren't you going to ask me how I got this wound?"

"How'd you get it?" Lawrence immediately asked, at which Eve's shoulders shook with mirth, and she covered her mouth like a town lass.

The fact that she seemed genuinely amused was painful to see.

"Well played. It's not that I'm asking you only because you're in the best

position.”

“But I’m also not badly placed to cross that dangerous bridge.”

This was not merely banter.

The moment he let his guard down was the moment he’d be crossing that bridge free of charge.

“My exploiting a gap and your protecting what you have are not the same thing.”

“Indeed. My conversations with my companion cut me to the bone.”

Constantly on the defensive, Lawrence knew he would eventually lose to Eve.

She nodded and changed her expression. “There’s no longer much doubt. The north-side fisherman caught a narwhal.”

“A nar—” Lawrence began, but then hastily checked the door over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, he’s not such cheap help that he’d eavesdrop on me. The people who locked me up here are terrified I’ll get angry, even though they did this to me.”

Lawrence didn’t know how far he could trust that, but there was nothing to be gained by doubting them.

He nodded and faced forward, then asked the question again. “A narwhal? As in the immortal sort?”

“Yes. A horned sea monster. Eating its flesh brings longevity, and its powdered horn cures all diseases.”

Lawrence believed such things to be superstitions, and from Eve’s tone, it seemed she was not serious.

“I’d heard that without freezing water they die, so how would one make it this far south?”

“According to the sailors, depending on the severity of the weather, fish and other creatures can be driven south—though I’d never heard of that happening to a narwhal. When they’re trafficked, it’s almost always deer bones or horns.”

There were any number of tales about immortality methods and cure-all medicines.

Moreover, orthodox believers seemed every bit as inclined to believe them as pagans did.

People's desire to believe in a land free of sickness and suffering where one went after death was proof the world was filled with suffering, and likewise the very fact of the Church's teachings meant that eternal life could never actually be gained.

Travelers and merchants who wandered many lands, seeing all sorts of goods and talking with all sorts of people, as well as soldiers for whom death or old age were constant companions—they all knew such stories were mere superstitions.

But there were many who did not know.

And aristocrats who'd never left their lands were a perfect example.

For a living narwhal, there were some who'd come running, bringing all their gold with them.

"But…surely that doesn't mean—"

"Yes. If they have the narwhal, the north-side faction believes they can turn everything around."

For a moment, Lawrence thought the leg of his chair had broken, so stricken was he at the enormity of the prospect.

This town had enough conflict even in the best of times, and now an article had been found that could flip the balance entirely.

There would be war.

Lawrence realized it instantly.

"The south-side faction wants to control this side at any cost. They can't have equality. It would be bad enough if the north gets the narwhal and sells it to raise the money to pay their debts, and the possibility that they might just involve a landed lord and go straight to war can't be ruled out, either. So the south can't let them have it, no matter the cost. They'll steal it, sell it—two

birds, one stone. It will raise an enormous amount."

And if they stormed the church grounds, that would constitute an act of war against the Church.

"So what say you? If you can slip through this passage, don't you think something incredible awaits you on the other side?"

She was right.

Eve was surely trying to use Lawrence's membership in the Rowen Trade Guild to its maximum advantage.

Relations between north and south in this town were at their worst.

Yet in the midst of that, Lawrence had managed to connect with Eve while going unnoticed in the town, which gave him a rare ability.

For a spy, there could be no better position.

But there was something Lawrence had not mentioned.

And that was that he'd already told Kieman about his acquaintance with Eve.

"Will you do it? No…" Eve shook her head deliberately, then looked straight at Lawrence. "What will it take to convince you to do it?"

This would unquestionably involve betraying the guild.

Eve was well aware of that, and the people in the south certainly knew what a trade guild was.

And so Lawrence spoke.

No matter what the reward, Lawrence was confident that as long as it was something he could hold in his hands, it would be granted him.

There was simply that much profit at stake here.

"If I say I'll consider it?"

Eve silently shook her head.

If he refused the offer to become an agent for her, it would not be strange of her to immediately consider him an enemy.

Or at the very least, treat him as such.

Which meant there could be hesitation.

That would be nothing less than hesitation over which side he would ally with, and no one was less trustworthy than a spy.

And yet Lawrence hesitated.

There was no telling what Kieman might be planning, but this could be used.

What would Kieman say if Lawrence told him about this?

With absurd profit piled on both sides of the scale, it didn't easily move either way.

Merchants were always weighing profit and loss.

No, indeed, what else could there be to consider?

"About the wolf remains, was it?" asked Eve flatly, either seeing through Lawrence or having planned to incorporate that into her negotiation all along. "You've good instincts, so I'm sure you noticed that Reynolds is quite serious about them. And that he wants my help."

Eve smiled thinly.

Evidently Lawrence had done just as she expected he would with Reynolds and the story of the wolf remains.

She probably even had some idea of whom Reynolds wanted to get in contact with.

"…You knew, and you still wrote me that letter."

"Are you angry?"

"Not at all. I'm glad my guess was right."

Eve smiled cynically, standing up from her chair and tossing two more logs onto the fire.

"There aren't many in the north who can afford wood for their fireplaces. Most burn peat."

"And yet I hear there's more charity on this side."

"Heh. That lad will be popular no matter where he goes."

It was enough to make Lawrence want to know just how sweaty Eve's palms were.

Her expression changed readily, but he could tell well enough that she was hiding her true thoughts.

"So how about it? It's quite an opportunity, I reckon."

"Oh, I'm sure it is."

But demons were always offering great power—in exchange for life.

If Lawrence accepted this, there was no question he would damage the trade guild's profits.

Not only that, but if they were to find out, he would either be cast out or punished.

He claimed not to be worried about Holo, but then he remembered Kieman's sudden change, his cold countenance.

And as a merchant, it was no exaggeration to say that his life would be over.

"Did you see Kieman?" Eve asked.

It wasn't out of any particularly iron-clad self-control that Lawrence didn't show surprise on his face.

Eve's words were just so accurate that his shock stunned him into blankness.

"I reckon my name would be sure to come up if you went to the guild house looking for information. I can see his face now," said Eve with what seemed to be simple amusement, as though she were talking about an old friend.

Or else—were even men like Kieman part of Eve's plots?

No, that couldn't be, Lawrence told himself.

"Yes, quite…he's a great merchant, as I recall."

"He certainly is. There's a gifted trader in every guild, and he's the one," said an animated Eve.

"So, why do you mention this Mr. Kieman?"

"He's no one to be trifled with, and he's been chasing me obsessively. Can't

blame me for feeling threatened, eh?”

Eve’s narrowed eyes looked distinctly wolflike, perfectly suited to a silvery frozen forest.

“…Quite.”

“Anyway, he’s a formidable man, no question. He’s burned me several times over.”

Eve looked down at the table, a thin smile playing over her lips.

Memories let one smile even at unhappy things.

But Eve did not have time to waste on introspection.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“If it comes down to that, what would you say to dropping the guild?”

The notion struck Lawrence as more absurd than surprising. “Where would a merchant who’d left his guild go?” he asked.

Membership brought an expanded business network, various rights and privileges, name recognition, all the various profits that came along with those things.

It also provided the peace of mind of knowing you had comrades all across the land.

Leaving those protections was hardly different from choosing bankruptcy.

“You should come work for me,” said Eve, fingering the corner of the parchment.

“For you?”

“Yes. Come work for me.”

Lawrence remembered the words Reynolds had used: “Bolan Company.”

Did such a thing truly exist? Lawrence wondered, as Eve’s gaze became distant, and she pointed to her own mouth and spoke.

“I’m locked up in here on the orders of the guy who gave me this wound,” she

said, indicating the corner of her mouth with a finger—a finger that was feminine, but somehow differently than Holo's.

It was slender and long, but somehow sturdy as well.

Like a sailor preparing to resist the song of the mermaids, Lawrence readied himself to pour lead into his ears.

"He's the grandson of one of the landowners that originally signed the delta marketplace contracts. He's two years younger than me, but his wits and drive for wealth are about the same as mine. And he holds them about as dearly as I do."

Another cynical smile.

Lawrence wondered if the loneliness he saw in her face was just an illusion.

"He dreams of getting out of this town. Talks with a straight face of getting the narwhal and using the money to head south and found a great trading company. 'With you I could outwit the old men,' he raged, and struck me with his left hand, then grabbed me by the shoulder."

Then Eve paused, almost laughing softly, but Lawrence saw her cover it up with a deep breath.

But the smile she swallowed became her flesh and blood, and then it showed purposefully on her face.

"There's no way not to betray this, don't you think?"

From Eve's mouth came terrifying words.

She was wooing Lawrence to convince him to betray the trade guild and collect information about the narwhal.

And that in turn was to help the landowners regain their power in Kerube.

But that was only on the surface. The son of one of the landowners was attempting to have the creature for himself, so he could abandon Kerube and go south.

And Eve was saying she would betray that son.

She faced Lawrence.

She spoke. She, whom he had already betrayed.

“Kieman is trying to use me.”

Lawrence’s head couldn’t keep up with Eve’s words.

One by one they piled up too high, and he couldn’t make sense of them.

“He knows that wayward son is madly in love with me, you see. So he’ll contrive to deceive the son through me.”

It was like being blindfolded and led onto a battlefield.

Eve was painting a picture with the things Lawrence didn’t know, with the things he couldn’t know, and with the things whose truth he couldn’t possibly discern.

And even if the picture were explained to him, he wouldn’t understand it.

It was impossible to understand.

“His goal is to choke the life out of the landowners. Most likely, he’ll try to get them to sign a contract that gives him the rights to the land in exchange for handing over the narwhal. The titles will go to Kieman, and the narwhal will be stolen by the son. You would think it absurd, no? Well, just watch me give the plan to that wayward son. When’s the actual answer, you ask?”

To avoid suffocating her audience, Eve posed a question even her audience could answer.

“You’ve gotten past the love affair.”

She nodded, satisfied, perhaps because Lawrence had not gotten out of his seat.

“Kieman, of course, understands why I’m thinking about all of this. The old men hate change. We’d be best rid of these circumstances, but for long years there’s been no way to change them. That’s true for both the north and south sides. And it’s also true that the younger generation is frustrated. I’ll bet Kieman’s been going mad trying to figure something out, some way to overturn the strange balance of Kerube and reform the town, along the way outwitting the other companies and trade guilds and making a real name for himself. Cleverly, rationally, and for his own reasons.”

“Or at least that’s the picture the trap you’ve surely readied is using.”

It was all Lawrence could say.

Eve showed Lawrence both palms in a gesture of surrender.

He knew perfectly well he was being made fun of.

“I have no way of verifying the truth of these things you’ve said. So on what do you suppose I should found my decision?”

The wolf of the Roam River territory smiled and answered, “Your past experiences.”

“I’ve been deceived before.”

“Indeed, you have. But a wise merchant said something, once.” It was somehow odd that her curled lip was not baring a sharp fang. “Suspect deception, but be deceived,” said Eve, and chuckled.

It was enough to make Lawrence wonder if she were drunk.

No, she surely was, for this strange exchange of illusions within illusions.

Lawrence prepared himself and stood up from his chair.

It would only be dangerous to remain here.

“I assume your answer is ‘nay’?”

Despite a conversation for which she should have been so drunk she would’ve been unsteady on her feet, Eve’s voice was as cold and clear as a winter stream.

Hence the cold shiver down his back, Lawrence was sure.

“Kieman will most likely ask for your cooperation, since you’re in such an exceedingly convenient position. And by the way…,” said Eve, smiling happily. “Ted Reynolds of the Jean Company wants to use my connections. If I wish him to, I’m sure I can have him whisper the name of the person he wishes to do business with to me. You were following the stories of the wolf bones, weren’t you?”

Eve Bolan, the merchant and onetime noblewoman.

Lawrence’s hand unconsciously went for the knife at his belt.

“If you think I’m unarmed, you’re quite mistaken.” The smile disappeared from Eve’s face.

She’d claimed he wasn’t listening, but there was a guard with a sword standing watch outside the door. And he doubted he was some mere neighborhood ruffian.

And anyway, merchants best avoided sword fights.

Lawrence slowly pulled his hand away from the knife, gave a short bow, turned his back, and began to walk away.

Eve’s words came just as he was putting his hand to the door.

“You’ll regret it.”

The same words Kieman had said.

Lawrence clenched his teeth and opened the door.

There in the hallway, the guard leaned against the wall, eyes closed, just as before.

He looked as he passed by and saw the sword, clasp undone, ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice.

“Tell no one,” the guard said.

Lawrence didn’t nod, didn’t even reply, and not because the order somehow went without saying.

He *couldn’t* tell anyone.

He’d considered himself a full-fledged traveling merchant for many years now—long enough to know perfectly well just how small he was.

And yet he’d just glimpsed a piece of a terrifying structure.

A gamble with a truly unbelievable amount of money.

He couldn’t rid himself of the thought of it.

When he opened the front door of the building, a carriage was waiting, and it had been readied for Lawrence.

“Sir, please.”

On the opposite side of the driver were the three workers still cutting the hide.

And then Lawrence realized.

They were lookouts.

He accepted the proffered cloak and draped it low over his head as he climbed into the carriage.

He asked himself if he should seek Kieman's protection. Given how much of her own hand Eve had shown, Lawrence couldn't imagine that Kieman would leave him be.

Any deal in a market where the prices were unknown was best abandoned.

Lawrence was lost in contemplation, and before he knew it, he arrived at his inn's rear entrance.

Forcing the strained muscles in his face to move, he thanked the driver, entering the inn and heaving a deep sigh.

The innkeeper's face peeked in—he probably heard the door open and close—and Lawrence wordlessly returned the cloak. He must have looked terrible indeed, for the innkeeper offered him a drink, but Lawrence refused it and made straight for the room.

The best course of action would be to escape before they were sniffed out here and before Kieman turned serious.

But now that he knew for certain that the Jean Company was pursuing the tale, there was a possibility that he could use them in some other city to begin collecting information again.

Lawrence put his hand to the door and opened it.

What he needed to do now was protect his tiny boat from the approaching storm.

No picture could possibly have captured the look on his face in that moment.

"Something came for you," said Holo.

She held up a sheet of parchment, and Lawrence knew at a glance what it

was.

It had the seal of the Rowen Trade Guild.

The red wax impression of the seal seemed, without any exaggeration, like the signature of some demon.

Though his mouth went dry, he tried desperately to swallow.

The guild had long since discovered where he was staying.

Kieman was serious.

And everything Eve said was true.

Talk was continuing over Lawrence’s head.

The huge gears made a terrible grinding sound as they turned.

AFTERWORD

AFTERWORD

It has been a while. This is Isuna Hasekura.

Just as the title suggests, this is the first volume of a story.

As to the question of why that is, answering it would take a book in and of itself, so I can't say too much, but the major reason is that it's impossible to tell how many pages a basic plot will require.

I planned to write only what was absolutely necessary, but it kept growing and growing.

With great effort, I managed to trim away pages and complete a first draft, but because there was so much of it and it was still a little messy, it wound up split into two volumes, and I did more editing on the second volume.

Which all means that my beautiful bimonthly publication schedule did not quite happen and a bit of a gap opened up, so hopefully you all will do me the favor of waiting a bit longer.

Lawrence should be really cool in the second volume.

At least, that's what the plot says!

Incidentally, recently I ate something truly strange and now will report about it.

It was sashimi made from—I swear—the back fat of an Asiatic black bear.

The restaurant owner was an amazing hunter and had taken wild boars in Okinawa and deer in Nara, and prepared the game he took as dishes in his restaurant. Well, apparently, he was lying about the deer, but the boar was true.

So, the Asiatic black bear back fat.

According to what I'd heard in advance, it was said to be not unlike *uma no*

tategami, or sashimi made from the tender neck meat of a horse, but when I actually tried it, it was like unsalted butter. It melted in my mouth immediately, and there was no odor at all, only a slight fatty sweetness, and lacking any actual meat, it really was just like eating butter.

There on a side street surrounded by high-rise buildings, sitting in front of the shop on folding chairs and using a small refrigerator filled with beer as a table, it really was a very rustic-seeming situation, which made things only more delicious.

Now that I've talked about it, it's made me want *yakiniku* for dinner, so I think I'll do that tonight.

And it looks like I've filled the page, so we'll leave it at that. I'll see you again in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura

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