



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*

Volume 6

狼と香辛料

Spice and Wolf

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Merchant meats
spicy wolf.

支倉凍砂
Isuna Hasekura

狼と香辛料

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VI

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

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Jyuu Ayakura





"Master!"

The boy had taken to his feet, ignoring the sentries' attempts to stop him. He ran along the pier, and the target of his voice was none other than Lawrence.

"Master! It's me! It's me!"



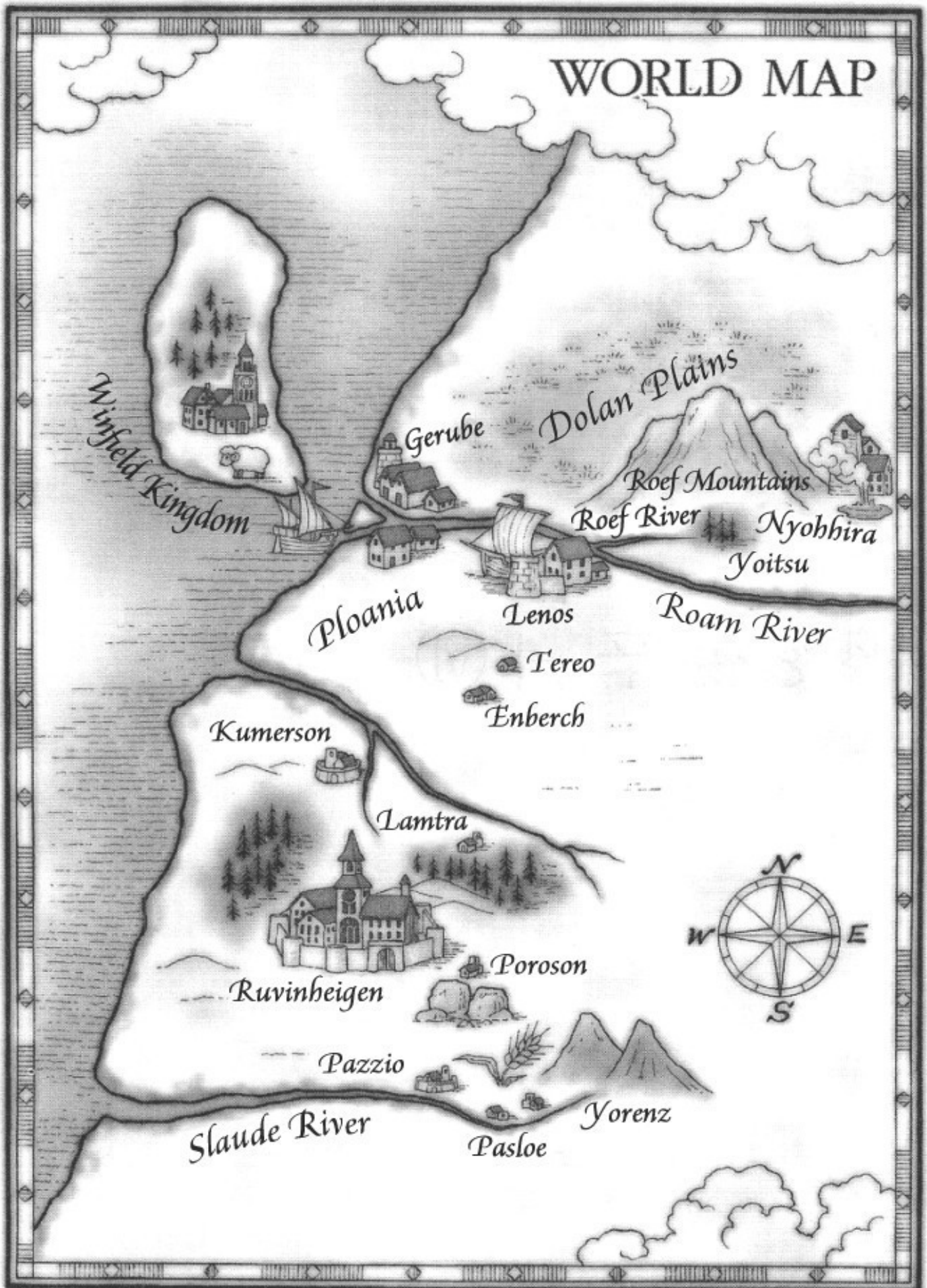
“You fool.”

Holo seemed stunned into laughter. She looked around, then suddenly crouched. She placed her arms around his neck, and sat her light body in his lap.

“If you were in my place, you would have been angry too, right?”



“Hahaha! [She's nimble as a cat!] You know, that somehow suits her..”



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ⑥

Spice and Wolf

Volume 6

*Translation & Editing by
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

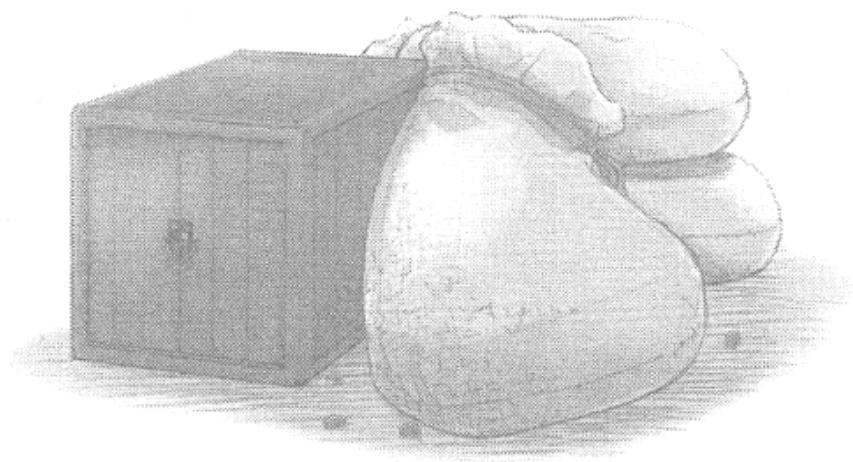
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Prologue

Holo walked with a large stride. A powerful stride, as if to stomp holes into the rocky ground. Lawrence normally slowed his pace for her, but this time she was in the lead.

It was pandemonium in the city. They were rushing through a riotous crowd and Holo's hand gripped Lawrence's, forcing him to meet her pace. From another angle they might appear like a gentle nun holding the hand of some poor merchant, protecting him from being attacked by gangs amidst the chaos.

But the truth was different. Lawrence already had her palm clearly imprinted on his right cheek, but that didn't prevent her from slapping him again.

"Hurry up. Move faster!"

Presently, Holo was the farthest thing from gentle. She violently pulled Lawrence ahead and any smaller steps would earn him a scolding. His face was like a honey-glazed raspberry pie - which had been dropped on the floor. And yet Lawrence couldn't even get a word in edgewise.

Holo clearly didn't like being "robbed". And it wasn't as if he could get angry at her. He understood full well how angry she was with herself. But he *had* just fought for his life with Eve, who's desire to get rich from the fur trade in Lenos had left him injured. And immediately afterward was his touching and impassioned conversation with Holo. No matter what, he needed a breather.

"Can we take it a bit more slowly?"

He hadn't suffered a serious injury, nor was he anemic from blood loss, but his body had never felt more drained. His battle with Eve had been exhausting. His legs felt as heavy as iron rods. His arms swung clumsily and stiffly like a wooden doll. Surely there was no need to rush like this. That was all Lawrence meant, yet Holo's head turned and stared at him with eyes like boiling oil.

"Slowly? More slowly, you say? So you walked *slowly* when you returned to me?"

Lenos was in the throes of calamity.. no one would have batted an eye if Holo had screamed those words.

"No.. I ran to you!"

Holo did not reply. She continued her stride, her silence saying it all: "Suck it up. This pace is nothing compared to running." Since her hand continued to hold his, he had no choice but to follow.

After Lawrence had returned to the Delink Trading Company and convinced Holo to continue their journey, the two pushed open the doors of the company hand in hand. It was not that they simply held hands, but rather their fingers were intertwined - they were linked together.

And that was why he had no choice but to follow. As she pushed forward, so did he. Because easing up meant that pain would shoot through him from her pull. And that pain would not exist if he remained close to Holo. They pressed onward like this until they reached Arold's inn.

"Get out of the way!"

Many merchants had gathered outside the inn to exchange news about the town's situation. Holo bellowed at them and barreled toward the inn's door. The merchants cleared a path, swayed by her domineering momentum, and stared at the two of them. "They'll remember this on their next visit" thought Lawrence in silent worry.

"Where is that old fogy?"

Seated in the inn, at the table where Arold would normally be seen drinking, were two men who seemed to be traveling carpenters.

"Old.. fogy?"

"That bearded fogy! The owner of this inn! Where is he?!"

The two of them appeared thrice her age. And yet, cowed by her fury they turned to face each other, then replied.

"We don't know.. we were just asked to keep an eye on this place."

"Awoooo!" howled Holo. Fear gripped the men. Even Lawrence stepped back. Should they have seen her fangs, he had prepared a cover story: that all sufficiently angry women seemed to bear fangs.

"Fleeing with that fox.. do they think they can escape payment for deceiving us? You! Come!"

Holo shouted at Lawrence and began pulling him upstairs. The two men just stared. After they left, Lawrence figured, those men would probably stare at each other for a while. There was something amusing about picturing their facial expressions.

There was only one reason Arold - the inn's owner - would not be there. He had joined Eve on the path Lawrence had refused to take; southward on the river. Eve would head to the next port to sell fur and Arold would begin his pilgrimage to the south. He was a man of few words so no one knew his reasons. Given his close relations with Eve they may have shared some experience and come to understand one another.

But people long for a place to call home, and the longer they lived there the more comfortable they would be. And this old, run-down inn had been Arold's home since the time it was still a factory. He surely had a remarkable reason to leave it's comfort behind to rely on Eve's support.

Those who had lived a long life - like Holo - had experienced a great deal and made a great many decisions. Yet sometimes one simply placed life's weights on that grand scale called "the world" to see how it tilted. In fact this was why Lawrence had returned to Holo at the Delink Trading Company. It was also why he now pulled Holo back, causing her to turn to him as they entered their room in the inn.

"I need to ask you something."

Not expecting Lawrence's action, Holo was smoothly pulled to him. Her face momentarily bore her normal expression - uncertain yet determined, and clearly puzzled by his action.

"What do you intend to do?"

Of course the Wisewolf's face had already reverted to a fierce expression before he even asked this question.

"Did you just ask what I intend to do?"

She was obviously holding back the words: "I will tear out your throat for questioning me!" But Lawrence was not intimidated. He raised their still-clasped hands and wiped some of his own blood from her lips, wondering when it fell there. The mask of anger was slowly crumbling from her face. She was struggling to control her anger, yet unable to master her emotions.

"Heh.. if we're to leave town we need to properly plan the journey."

"You.. you dare to talk of planning?!"

Holo's expression grew more and more complex. She seemed to be struggling to understand why she was even shouting at Lawrence.

"We need a clear objective."

"A clear objective? Are you saying you do not want to chase down that fox and regain your money?"

Holo drew her face closer to Lawrence in a threatening manner, yet still had to raise her head to face him. It ended up looking less like a threat and more like she was saying "hug me". But Lawrence knew better than to dare try, lest he be flung out the nearest window.

"That fox.. Eve? You mean to get back at her?"

"Of course! She lied to us, vanished, and owes us dearly. She must be punished!"

"Like with Remelio and the gold?"

Holo nodded, but no longer raised her head. It was likely that she was trying to regain her composure. They had been completely betrayed by Remelio. But was it the same this time? Yes, Lawrence had fallen into Eve's trap, but rationally that was his fault. Being with Holo now meant he had given up on Eve's plan. In fact, Lawrence felt he had *escaped* from Eve's insane plan - all signs pointed at them going against the local church, and Lawrence was certain they would not be forgiving.

The city had fallen into a severe situation because of the churches' interference. It was chaos. The church was surely busy handling the situation, since they intended to build their power base in the city. That, and Eve wasn't the only one buying fur to trade in the south – a quick glance at the harbor would make that obvious. So the churches' plan had not gone as smoothly as they had hoped. They could no longer simply focus on Eve. They might even opt to let her go to deal with the problems at hand. And afterward they would naturally come after Lawrence, her co-conspirator.

Clearly Eve had taken a risky bet and won. It was utterly inappropriate for Lawrence to try

profiting from this fur trade gamble. And so he had immediately bowed out of that investment. He instead invested back in Holo. It was unreasonable for him to profit from Eve's continued gambling. And of course, Holo was wise enough to realize all of this. She had spoken harshly despite that. She understood that she was being willful with Lawrence despite really being angry with herself. As such she was at a disadvantage in their argument. She still snapped at him.

"Are you not upset? We are falling behind!"

Seeing no avenue of attack, she had changed the topic. Lawrence turned away and nodded, with a defeated expression saying "I just can't beat your anger, Holo." But his answer was not one of defeat.

"Well, yes, I am, but to tell you the truth we're in a bind."

"What do you mean by that?"

And so began another insidious argument not caused by lack of trust, but simply because neither of them could admit defeat. It seemed they were best-suited for such games of deceit.

"I fear that Eve has planned too far ahead. It's no accident she found a boat in such short order. We can't even give chase by horse, given the uproar the stables are in. We'll not catch her in time."

"What about your horse?"

"Him? At top speed I doubt he could run far. Riding horses differ from work horses who pull carts."

Upon hearing that, Holo turned her gaze to the floor in deep thought. Of course, Lawrence was withholding the obvious solution. Holo had said it herself at the Delink Trading Company: as a wolf she was faster than anything.

"On top of that, Eve already seemed to have a buyer lined up. She meticulously planned this to be a step ahead of the church. She chose the perfect escape strategy."

It was no exaggeration. She could flee by land or river. Catching her by land was likely, but by river? Impossible. It varied by destination, of course, but traveling downstream on a river was generally five times faster than traveling by land. But Holo would never accept defeat.

"Even so I cannot accept this situation. I must catch her before I can calm down."

Even when powerless she could not relent. Half of her reason for chasing Eve was simple hatred. The other half was entirely unreasonable. And that was all the reason she needed to be angry at herself.

Holo had told Lawrence that she wanted their journey to end before their gradually-improving relationship had a chance to sour. Hearing that, he finally understood her mind. Eternal happiness was an impossibility; their journey couldn't last forever. But Lawrence still wanted their final parting to be a smiling one.

Of course he wanted to prolong their trip as much as possible.. one continues to drink even when drunk, after all. Eventually Holo's fear would have to come true. However he at least wanted their journey to last until Holo arrived at her home town. And so he had returned to the Delink Trading Company to take her hand.

After their conversation at Delink, it was unnecessary to give a voice to these thoughts. They could remain in their hearts, unspoken. Since thankfully, this detour would extend their time together. So he replied.

"You're right.."

"Huh? You agree?"

Holo spoke with happiness appearing alongside her anger. What a farcical expression, he mused.

"Actually, I have a debt to repay."

Eve had left Lawrence the deed to Arold's inn once she realized that their deal had failed. This enabled him to buy Holo back from the Delink Trading Company. But of course, the actual value of the inn was decided by the Company. And that value had turned out to not quite be enough.

Still, in order to strengthen their relationship with Eve - who was actually a noble - they chose to write off the slight difference. At least that's what they had told Lawrence. In reality any slight amount owed could be leveraged in the future. Such things are terribly powerful in the world of business. So in Lawrence's mind, he wanted to pay back the difference.

And that, of course, was debt. Tolerating such a debt wasn't easy for him, but he would if it was for Holo's happiness.

"Yes, and you also bled. They need to learn that they harm me when they harm my companion."

Lawrence barely restrained himself from asking "and who was it that just slapped your companion?"

"Then.. we should pursue?"

"Yes. Though it has been a long time since my last hunt."

Holo smiled menacingly, but her words weren't conveyed with their usual power. Perhaps she too was relieved at having finally found a convenient excuse to prolong their journey, without revealing her true feelings. Since their involvement with the poisoned wheat conspiracy, Holo and Lawrence had been longing to find such an excuse. It was desperately naïve of them, but that hardly mattered anymore. People were always changing, but the dishonesty between Lawrence and Holo remained constant.

"But.."

Holo raised her head in response, with a look of concern.

"I'm a trader. My dignity is important to me, but I am no knight capable of earning their fortune from fame alone. Should I lose too much money from this business, it will have to cease immediately. Please understand."

Although Lawrence was prepared to stall his trading career until the next summer, problems would arise if they journeyed longer than that. Trading required a second party, after all. Lawrence couldn't survive indefinitely on his own. Of course if Holo wished to follow him after that, things would be different.

"I go for your sake. If you willed it, I could only say yes."

A strange response, but Lawrence still nodded in appreciation of her empathy.

"That helps ease my mind."

Her ear twitched. Perhaps in delight at their silly play-acting, or perhaps due to having extended their time together. Actually, it was probably from both.

"So how shall we give chase?"

"Horse and cart, of course."

"But it will take five days.. will you tolerate that?"

Holo had been quite short-tempered and tired upon arriving in Lenos; it had been a grueling journey. It would be easy to fall ill traveling by cart in winter without resting along the way. Lawrence wasn't looking forward to it. As expected, Holo's face darkened.

"Ugh.. five straight days on the cart?"

"There will be towns and villages along the way. Maybe some inns, too, but I doubt they'll be comfortable."

It might have been pleasant to lodge at traveler's churches, but the geography was ill-suited for such buildings. There would likely only be flimsy wooden inns or hostels. It would not be very restful staying in such a hovel alongside other travelers who may well be thieves.

"Then.. what about the river?"

"The river?"

"Well, if that fox went south on the river, we should as well. That seems most reasonable."

So Holo *wanted* to take a boat, Lawrence thought. He recalled them holding hands while walking by the harbor, and hesitated. No one would be willing to give travelers a boat ride during the city's crisis.

"I'm not certain there will be any boats.."

"You *must* find one!"

Holo spoke emphatically, waving their clasped hands. Her eyes shone with a crazed light. A sense of dread filled Lawrence. His instincts were telling him to escape, but he was trapped with Holo.

"Or do you think this way will get you in trouble?"

She gazed at him with a look of concern. Genuinely concerned, he turned away.

"If so, just tell me. I am chasing that fox for your sake, but I might not be thinking clearly. What do you think? Hey, you!"

She raised Lawrence's hand to her chest. He couldn't help feeling happy that she had regained her composure, but now she would be impossible to deny - she had a new weapon. A shy look spread over her and she lowered her head. And knowing what was coming, Lawrence could only murmur, "oh dear God no.."

"I am just so happy you love me, that-"

"Alright! Alright! We'll find a boat! Will that do?"

A feigned look of surprise came over her, and she smiled. She pulled Lawrence's hand upward and pretended to kiss it, pressing her lips so her fangs were visible behind them. It was safe to say that Holo had won this battle.

It wasn't an exaggeration that he had put himself in danger, but there was always a price for saying certain things. Having told Holo he loved her, truly from his heart, there was no way he could resist her now. He had handed a dangerous contract to an opponent with his fingerprint on it. Should that opponent smile wryly and joke about tearing it, he could only watch in terror. Everything written on that contract was the truth, after all.

"Then, you, pack up, and-"

Holo paused after lowering their still-clasped hands.

"Hmm?"

"-since it will take time to find a boat, buy us some white bread first."

Of course he protested. She could argue as vigorously as she wanted, but Lawrence wouldn't relent. His one free hand could grip his wallet just as tightly.

"Didn't I just say I'm in debt?!"

"Then surely it will not matter to be a *little* more in debt?"

"What kind of logic is that?!"

Holo pursed her lips and stared up at him.

"But I thought you loved me?"

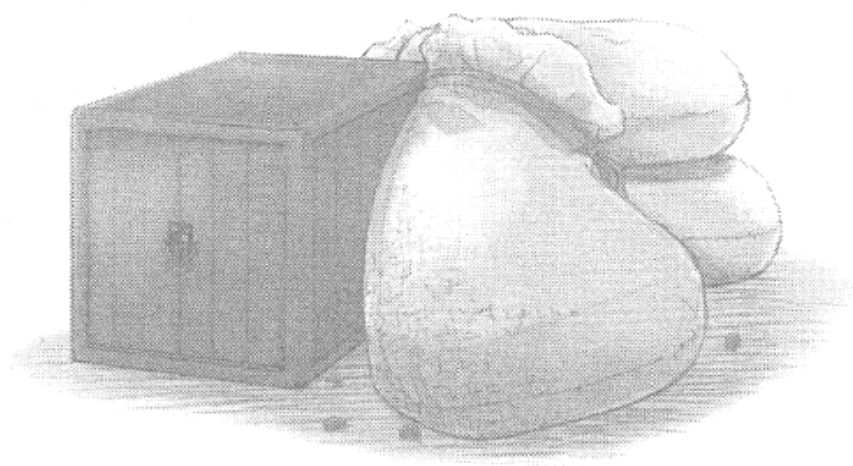
No matter how terrible the weapons, one had to find a way to fight back when being mercilessly pummeled in a corner.

"Yes, but I also love money."

He calmly responded, staring into her eyes. Holo responded in turn, by calmly stepping on his foot.

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Chapter 1

"Hey, make way! We're carrying silver bound for Imid!"

"So what? We were here first, deal with it!"

Sailors roared at one another from their boats, as water splashed wildly about. Lenos harbor was like an angry beehive. Furious cries and shouts were being followed by the sounds of objects dropping into the water. Even the normally-calm water seemed stormy.

Given the situation, the boats most willing to endure verbal abuse were probably the ones carrying fur. Boats usually got by with one oarsman, but it seemed everyone had hired more in a desperate bid for haste. The first boat to reach the next port would reap the highest rewards, after all.

Lawrence couldn't help but feel inspired by such a brazen display of rivalry.

"Hey you, this is no time to gaze in awe. We need a boat!"

"This is pretty ridiculous.. do you really insist on going by boat?"

Finding a boat willing to accept passengers would take a lot of luck. All of the boats were hastily queuing up like ants to leave the harbor.

"You yourself pointed out how long it will take by cart."

"Well I can't deny that, but.."

It was difficult to make out, but frequent outbursts were audible from where the harbor met the open river. Perhaps those who didn't want the fur exported were interfering.

"What?"

"You look like you are having second thoughts."

"That's not true."

Any child could tell he was lying. Holo shot him a cold stare and spoke.

"Then why don't you get your head out of the clouds and find one already?"

No boat would have been willing to carry a horse right now, so Lawrence had leased his to a stable. And from the looks of things, every horse in town was being used at the harbor to move goods. Even if he did change his mind, traveling by horse was now impossible.

Moreover, they were headed to the port town of Gerube, where most of the businesses would be shut down for the winter. Lawrence therefore had no reason to complain about lost business.

Horses weren't going to be an option after all, he concluded.

"Fine, fine. I'll hunt down a boat. You take these coins and buy us food from those stalls over there.. enough for three days. If you want alcohol, please get spirits."

Lawrence reached into his purse and produced 2 dazzling silver coins for Holo.

"But what about the white bread?"

Holo knew enough about the prices of goods now to know that wasn't enough for white bread as well.

"It takes magic to make white bread expand, the same kind that we'd need to be able to afford it."

"..."

Lawrence's pleas at the inn seemed persuasive; she had dropped the subject of white bread.

Though she seemed to want to argue about it again, something else had piqued her interest. She raised her head in confusion.

"But why would you want spirits?"

Lawrence *did* prefer smoother drinks like wine. And knowing how sharp Holo was, part of him was happy at the possibility that she was asking for his sake.

Of course, he swallowed his pride before it could appear on his face and ambiguously

responded.

"You'll soon find out."

This seemed to leave Holo at a loss, and earned him a swift punch in the arm.

"I shall strike at them as well.. for a discount on their finest liquor!"

"Just don't strike them that hard."

"So be it. Then, let us regroup here."

"Alright. Oh..!"

Lawrence stopped in mid-nod, accidentally putting his injured cheek on display. It had turned a greenish-purple, so he was considering buying some medicine.. but seeing the look of concern she was now wearing, he quickly reconsidered. It seemed injury had it's perks.

"You are so honest it is like reading a book."

"As a child I was taught that honesty is a virtue."

"And that is what your adult heart believes?"

She tilted her head and grinned derisively.

"No.. it wishes I was taught that honesty is idiotic."

Holo seemed to be holding back laughter as she replied.

"Hmm.. well people *do* treat you as the butt of every joke because you *are* an idiot."

She then spun around like a dancer and strolled off into the crowd. Lawrence shrugged and sighed, then scratched his head. He couldn't help but smirk at how much he enjoyed her frivolity. But he had to wonder..

"Did I just make it impossible to regain control of my life?"

If he had only handed her a certificate, Lawrence could have confiscated it with impunity.. even

if it would have made him a failure. But..

"I'm in love with you."

It already felt like years had passed since he spoke those words to Holo. He wasn't skilled enough with words to describe his feelings any other way. He had been struggling to breathe, and his cheeks felt so tight it had been difficult to say anything at all.

Of course the results were far from bad. It felt like a real weight was taken off his chest. It had just been slightly.. no, incredibly embarrassing. He only regretted that he couldn't shake the feeling he had been on the losing side of that confrontation.

"In the end, I was just losing another battle, huh?"

Lawrence groaned, smiling in self-deprecation and gazing in the direction Holo had departed. After shrugging and sighing once more, he trudged off toward the pier.

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His luck turned out better than he had expected - he found a boat very quickly.

The harbor was crowded, but one could still find willing goods-hauling boats if they were observant. Lawrence chatted with an old mariner and got lucky. Given how busy all the boats appeared to be, he had anticipated a steep boarding fee. But their asking price was actually reasonable.

Upon mentioning he was with a girl the old man smiled. Lawrence pretended not to notice, but it did inadvertently confirm Eve's need to pretend she was a man while doing business.

"Why're you headed to Gerube? There'll be no decent boats sailing back this way in the dead o' winter."

The mariner's name, Evan Lacoza, was not easy to pronounce. Given his name Lawrence judged him to be from the north-western coastland.. probably from a poor village.

People from the north tended to have stronger bodies and darker skin. Their eyes were bright, but they were not a talkative bunch. But this mariner was fat, with a booming voice and red face as if drunk.

"Same reason everyone else is headed to Gerube: fur."

"Oh?"

The man's eyes were measuring Lawrence up and he rolled his head about, cracking his neck.

"Without any luggage?"

"My would-be business partner took off with it already."

Lawrence quipped, then pointed at his puffy cheek. It's fish-like resemblance made the old man laugh. He spoke, patting Lawrence on the shoulder.

"Well, these things happen.. so where is this companion o' yours?"

"She's just out buying provisions."

Lawrence was about to scan for Holo among the stalls in the distance, when he sensed a strange mood nearby. He turned to look.. and there stood Holo, as if she had been there all along.

"Speak of the devil."

"My my, she's certainly a fine catch!"

The mariner clapped his hands upon catching sight of her. It rang so loudly even she was taken aback.

Sailors tended to have booming voices. That might prove too much for Holo's ears, which even seemed able to hear a person scowl.

"And her name..?"

He intentionally asked Lawrence, probably assuming them to be a couple. Quite a contrast from young Zheren's blunt behavior, when they first met him before their escapade with the Milone and Medio Companies.

Holo had a bag slung over her shoulder, presumably filled with bread and the like, and carried in her hands a little bottle of liquor. She had put on the appearance of a nun who was asked to

go shopping.

As usual she acted coy in public, feigning utmost restraint and respect for Lawrence in the presence of others. It was irritating to have to act humbly in turn, knowing that she was secretly laughing at him all the while.

"Holo."

"She even has a fine name! As for this old salt, I'm the so-called 'master' o' the Roam river, Lacoza."

That was how Lacoza, who appeared old enough to have a daughter Holo's age, introduced himself to Holo while puffing out his chest and shaking her hand.

"At least safety won't be a problem this trip."

"Why not?"

"How could it be, with such a beauty prayin' for us?"

Seafaring boats often had a figurehead carved onto their prow. It might be the bust of a goddess, or perhaps a famous queen or mermaid - but this icon of protection was invariably feminine. This strictly-feminine policy even extended to the names of the vessels themselves.

When it came to praying for safety, Lawrence could think of none better-suited than Holo.. on the land, at least. But as a wolf this surely didn't apply in the water. In fact, Lawrence barely restrained his laughter while imagining the regal Holo swimming the dog paddle.

"So, you all set? I'm not hard-pressed on account of the fur thing, but there's other goods a-needin' to be hauled as quick as possible."

"Hmm, I think so. We're good for food, right?"

Lawrence checked with Holo, who nodded. A wolf flawlessly playing the part of gentle kindness.

"Then have a seat.. you can pay me later."

Boats tended to be relaxed about boarding fees; it wasn't as though someone could easily ditch them once they were out on the open water.

"Alright! Looks like we're all in the same boat now!"

He quipped to a raucous chorus of laughter from the other sailors. It seemed they all shared the same sense of humor.

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Lacoza's boat was relatively small compared to the others. No sail, a flat bottom and a thin body.. any thinner in fact, and an unskilled oarsman would easily capsize it.

Aboard were a number of sacks large enough for Holo to wriggle into: stacked three feet tall, and probably containing wheat and beans. There were also several wooden crates in the back of the boat.

Prying them open certainly wasn't appropriate, so one could only speculate on their contents. Judging from their skilled construction, one could reason they held expensive goods.. likely the ones "a-needin' to be hauled as quick as possible."

Should the crates be heading upstream, they probably contained metallic goods like coins. Tin or iron need not be stored in such meticulous boxes, and precious stones would likely be under armed guard.

All in all there seemed to be little cargo for the boat's size. Perhaps that was due to the river being shallow.

With less rain and more snow in the winter, the mountain streams feeding rivers would freeze. And so, rivers became shallower. Boats too laden with goods could become mired on the riverbed, much like a wagon's wheels in deep mud. Goods might have to be thrown overboard, the boat might slow down other river traffic - the crew's reputation could suffer dramatically.

Yet it was said that there were accomplished sailors who had journeyed the same river so often they could control the boat by feel alone, with their eyes closed, regardless of the circumstance.

What about Lacoza?

Lawrence, his mind wandering aimlessly like this, sat himself at the front of the boat, releasing his grip on the blanket covering his back.

The boat swayed up and down with the waves. Lawrence wore a sickly smile as he recalled his first experience in a boat; madly gripping the sides in fear of being flung into the water.

Holo very self-awarably seated herself next to Lawrence. His smile visibly spread. She set down the bottle and bag upon her back before noticing his gaze. She returned a stare.

"What exactly are you smiling about?"

Holo spoke in a low voice - she was not acting.

"Because I'm not the only one who seems nervous."

"I am growing more comfortable, but I still fear the motion of this boat."

How strange it was for Holo to admit fear.. seeing Lawrence's astonished reaction, she pursed her lips.

"I expose my weakness only because I trust you."

"It's your fangs that you expose."

She hastily covered her mouth and coyly laughed at his joke. She did seem afraid, but admitting it so directly would only raise his suspicion. Was she being honest? Only she knew.

Suddenly she sat up.

"No.. I should not sit so close to you."

She turned her head away mournfully. Regardless of how happy a moment like this was, it would lose impact with repetition. Holo had expressed her deep fear of this scenario, but Lawrence was still amazed by her present behavior.

And yet he understood that she wasn't saying it with hidden purpose. They had purposely avoided discussing such things, both aware that certain topics were best avoided. One would walk on pins and needles if they didn't know where a trap lay, but if they knew where it was they could rest assured.

Holo had not intended her words as a warning to herself, nor to seek Lawrence's attention. They were likely spoken with the opposite intent. Their travels together would end with a smile; it was a fact. And so there was nothing to fear. And so Lawrence answered calmly.

"This is like the dialogue of some play."

A play about forbidden love, of course, but those words could not be spoken. Not seeing a nervous look upon his face, Holo lost interest. Turning to face him, she remarked,

"It could only be play dialogue if you were performing it with me."

"Perhaps I could if you weren't wearing that mask."

Holo, who wore a lonely expression, suddenly laughed and pursed her lips. She certainly wore facial expressions like masks from a play, he thought. He smiled in response.

Not long afterward, loud footsteps were heard on the dock behind the boat, followed by Lacoza bellowing.

"We'll be leaving the harbor shortly!"

He skillfully unfastened the dockline and tossed it aboard, then hopped aboard himself. It was like a child leaping into the river for a swim, but since it was impossible to call him thin (even if you were being polite), it was absolutely terrifying.

The boat shook violently and nearly sank. Even Lawrence was gripped by fear. Holo's face clearly showed an anxiety it had never shown, and her body froze. She gripped Lawrence's clothes tightly.. she was quite serious.

"Time to see a real oarsman in action! I promise you'll not see a better on this Earth!"

Upon boasting, Lacoza sank his oar in the water. His red face seemed filled with vigor. In spite of this it took a while for the boat to move in response. Still, eventually the aft of the boat crept away from the pier. He raised his oar, shifted it to a new position, and plunged it back into the water.

Four horses would be required to haul his goods by land, but by boat it could be done with the power of one man. While it was the reputation of sailors to boast, it was understood that their boasts weren't empty. Like Lacoza, many oarsmen could handle a boat on their own.

As their boat left the docks, he steered it into the current forming the lane to leave the harbor. Unbelievably, despite the large number of boats there was no collision. They all slipped past each other through the turbulent waters. It was as if all the sailors knew and understood each other; there were greetings and some quarrels, but their oars would always steadily guide their boats toward their destinations.

They picked up speed and the boat eventually stabilized. They had finally reached the mouth of the harbor. There, on the shore where the river and harbor intersected, stood a tower. It

seemed that a faction wishing to prevent the fur from flowing downstream had broken the tower's defenses and invaded it. They were gathered atop the tower's wall-walk, endlessly cursing and berating the boats as they passed by.

Armored and helmeted troops were now approaching the tower gate - likely the tower's men-at-arms and their knight captain. They stormed the tower and captured the invaders as Lacoza's boat circled past the tower and headed out onto the river proper. Lawrence couldn't empathize with the invaders, but he still hoped no one would be killed.

Watching this scene unfold had brought the city's situation back into his consciousness, but only for a moment. After all, Lawrence was also in quite a situation himself. His shock at Holo's desire to end their voyage wasn't as great as his shock at hearing her reasons. But he was most shocked by how selfishly he had confronted her, even if he knew that deep down it had been what she longed for.

As a result of his actions he had resolved to be gentler with Holo, especially given her lack of nautical experience. But, as usual, his courage to show kindness was stillborn. She had already recovered while he had lost himself in thought. Her grip on his clothes hadn't loosened, but she was calmly staring ahead of the boat. She wore the same expression of curiosity a brave youth might wear in her situation.

As she sensed his gaze fall upon her, she cocked her head to one side and gazed back at him. It seemed she always knew how she looked in the eyes of others, acting as if she anticipated everything. Lawrence, his courage drained, turned his face away and watched Lenos slowly pass by. A hissing laughter was eventually heard. Holo's hand, which had been clutching his clothes, was released and she spoke in amusement.

"Your kindness is frightfully frightening".

She lowered her head and laughed happily, her white breath flowing behind her. If that imp-like appearance made you want to pluck the fur off her tail, no one could blame you. But it was cold on the river. They couldn't part with Holo's tail. And so he slowly replied.

"I'm frightened by your smiling face."

"Fool."

Holo's grinning face beamed out from under her hood.

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Flowing by Lenos, the Roam River meandered from west to east, an ordinary river slowly flowing in the grasslands. When the water level was higher in Spring and early Summer, one could watch the magnificent sight of enormous snakes of lumber wriggling down the river. Right now, however, the best sight just happened to be the boats lined up behind one another.

There wasn't much else to see, just flocks of sheep and other animals drinking from the river, travelers walking along it's bank, and the white clouds flowing slowly in the sky above. Holo had a keen curiosity, but this was so boring she'd often rest her chin on the side of the boat, sometimes dipping her hand into the water and sighing. Lawrence could sympathize.

"This sure is leisurely."

Holo murmured between sighs. Lawrence, who had been nodding off all wrapped up in the same blanket, was roused. He yawned while stretching.

"Ugh.. it's indeed comfortable not holding the reins."

It *was* nice to be free from worry about countless holes in the road, or black kites and falcons taking aim at the cargo on his cart. Surely there was no need for him to be rubbing his eyes and waking up just as he had become drowsy. If you hear someone snoring next to you, you don't irritate them.

Lawrence had half a mind to travel by ship from now on, but Holo (who already didn't know what to do with her spare time on the wagon) seemed quite unsatisfied. She raised a hand that had cut the water's mirror-like surface, and suddenly splashed Lawrence.

The water was freezing. It made him frown. Seeing that, Holo turned away and placed her back against the side of the boat. She lifted her tail off Lawrence's feet with her hands. Lacoza was asleep behind a heap of cargo, so it was alright for her to expose her tail in such a grand gesture.

"Why can't you just count some sheep? You'll be snoring soon enough."

"I *did*.. I got bored after 72."

Holo casually tidied the fur on her tail to remove dirt and loose fur. Some fleas, too, but it was hardly worth losing sleep over that.. although in Holo's case she might actually hear them

loudly enough to lose sleep.

"..and counting them just made me hungry."

"Hmm.. good thing you stopped."

She flicked yet another flea at Lawrence. Of course, they were under the same blanket already so it made little difference.

"But I wonder.."

She paused to nibble at her fur.

"After we take revenge on that fox, what then?"

She was quite skilled at grooming her tail with her mouth, but it still ended up full of fur. Come Spring, she'd probably have it worse. Lawrence ruminated about that while helping her remove some of the bits she couldn't quite manage.

"Ah.. stay still.. after we do that, huh?"

"Yes. After that."

She closed her eyes like a spoiled child, asking this of Lawrence while enjoying his servitude. It was possible she was just fooling around with him, but she might actually be hoping for them to confront this difficult issue. After all, they had visited Lenos to search for clues as to Holo's origin, and had found the exact location. Logically, what came "after that" was the conclusion of their journey.

"Well, we'd have no shortage of food and fun if we dally until the spring thaw.. but if you'd prefer we could rent horses and rush back to Lenos and then head North."

"The Roef mountains, was it?"

Holo's origin lay somewhere in those mountains. They could be there within a month. If they made efficient use of time, it was only a matter of a few days.

Holo was fidgeting in a girlish manner, fussing with the fur on her tail. Lawrence had no trouble interpreting this; she was making him come up with an excuse.

"But you know, the mountains and mountainfolk must have changed over the years. Even if we head up the mountains along the Roef river, there's a chance we'll get lost along the way."

"Hmmp?"

Such a wily wolf, he thought, helping her clean the brown fur stuck in her mouth.

"We *could* always go to Nyohhira first.. you've been there before, if I remember rightly? It's a ten-day trip from Lenos this time of year, since you have to take a safer route through villages and towns before spring. So that would give us another twenty days."

He was counting the days off on his fingers as he spoke. He was instinctively assuming they would go at full speed with minimal rest. A traveling merchant's concept of time was measured in terms of travel time alone.

Going through Nyohhira was already a concession for a mind driven by business. Merchants only earned a fifth of the actual revenue on their sales - half went to tariffs, the rest to living expenses. So relaxing between ultimate destinations clashed with his merchant sensibilities. But of course, he knew he'd regret decreasing their time together. He was frozen staring at his hands, the last finger left uncounted. "Is that really the most time I can squeeze out for us?" he wondered.

"We'll need ten more days to enjoy the hot springs at Nyohhira."

Holo pushed down the last finger for Lawrence, adding her fingers to his own, in a gesture that looked like a couple warming each other's hands. Indeed he couldn't help but feel a warmth well up in his heart.

People did stay at Nyohhira for ten days at a time to make the most of it. But it was expensive. The inn's fees were highway robbery, especially considering the terrible meals they served. They even charged for water and their wine smelled foul and had barely any flavor.

And that was just for the privilege of enjoying the hot springs. Twice a day people would be sent to a doctor after spending too long in those "healing" waters. He'd be practically shoveling his money into those mineral waters. But there was no way he could say "no" now. Such a wily wolf.

"That look on your face makes it obvious you are fretting over money."

She spoke shyly, pulling their hands up to her face and caressing them. Her tail was wagging. Lawrence couldn't help but think about caressing it in turn and pulling it.

"I know it is expensive, I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. I watched others the last time I was there. So I will find us an unguarded hot spring, if you will add a little more to our food budget. That will suffice, will it not?"

It sounded wonderful in theory, but visitors at the hot springs were always trying to spend every possible minute in the miraculous waters. The worse a person felt, the more effective the healing powers of the waters seemed. It was a tourist trap. It would be a miracle if Holo could find unguarded hot springs anywhere near town.

And Lawrence knew that with Holo, "a little more" money was anything but.

"Each time you spend 'a little more' of my money, my dream gets further out of reach."

If he didn't put his foot down, she would inevitably ask him to buy her something at every stall. Despite Holo immediately flashing her "how dare you?!" expression, Lawrence held his ground. Even if admitting that he loved her put him at a disadvantage.

"There are a thousand words I might playfully reply with, but-"

Holo coughed gently, swished her tail, and continued.

"You claimed you had given up your dream of opening a shop when you returned to me."

She stared him down with her amber pupils, as if to test him. Her white teeth gleamed between her lips and white breaths.

"I told you I have set it aside, not that I have given up on it."

She sighed, as if disappointed by such a weak excuse. He wasn't being honest, and Holo surely perceived this. She could detect dishonesty, after all. So before she could point that out, he preempted her.

"But I'll admit that in my weaker moments I did consider giving it up."

"Escaping with conversational loopholes.. you truly are a merchant to the core."

"Oh fine.. I did give it up. Satisfied?"

He conceded. If she was going to act so frustrated, there was no way he would win.

"Then spending more money is not a problem - or so I would say, but first I wish to hear *why* you gave it up."

He considered starting off saying "my pleasure" but thought better of it. Doing his best to sound like he was taking the higher ground, he replied.

"Once I do open a shop my interest in business will surely be halved."

"Huh?"

"Having finally opened my own shop, I'd surely be nostalgic and shiftless. This would all be over, my adventuring at it's end."

Of course Lawrence would still be naturally drawn to money as before. But it would no longer be his chief concern; he would not be living in a whirlwind of profit motives. His will would slacken, and all he could do would be to say "what a shame that's all over now". Because he was already living his life's dream. He had what he wanted.

"Ah.."

Holo's expression shifted from mock-anger to a neutral expression, and she nodded. All happiness turns to ash some day - Holo knew that, given her fear of her own long lifespan.

"But you know, it was my dream for so long.. I hope you can appreciate that. After all, in the end it would still bring me great joy to have my own shop."

Holo was slowly nodding, but seemed puzzled.

"Hmm.. then this must be quite the disaster for you."

"..a disaster??"

It was as if they swapped expressions - he wore a look of puzzlement, while hers was saying "indeed".

"Mmmhmm. Since you gave up your dream for me. Those who say 'chase two rabbits and you catch nothing' would surely be depressed by this."

Lawrence was left speechless, his mouth hanging open. His mind was racing but no matter how much he wanted to find another meaning to her wordplay there was only one: even though he'd given up one rabbit, he'd still end up catching nothing.

It made him feel sick to his stomach. It was like ending up with no profit after a risky business venture. He turned his face away. Even as a joke, this was too cruel. When he turned back to her, he was greeted by a look of empathy.

"Whatever is the matter? Fret not, be happy! Those with nothing have everything to gain, do they not?"

Should he show anger? Sadness? Something else? It was as if she was speaking in a foreign language. The ends of her lips curled upward, and her tongue protruded between them like some jester.

"Ho ho, after all you are still doing nothing with me. If you wish to grasp things without reaching out your hand then perhaps you ought to become a magician."

Lawrence had never wanted to throw someone overboard so intensely. Once again, he had let her manipulate him to peer ever deeper into his heart.

She leaned up against him, like a wolf on another wolf, raising her head to speak.

"Heh.. but one doesn't simply mark the boundary of their territory with rope. One's attitude sheds more perspective on the situation."

He could feel her breath gently on his neck. "If I look at her, it's game over," he thought. Of course, the game was already over the moment that thought had crossed his mind.

"Of course you did not entirely give up your dream. At least, that is my hope. It is just that if you are satisfied with having a shop you will want an apprentice. Times will become too complicated to enjoy your life, will they not?"

Holo turned her face away and laughed. Lawrence felt like a fish that had been gnawed down to bones. He could fight all he wanted, but it would change nothing. He sighed, telling himself that

at the very least he ought to stop being so vulnerable.

She was grinning, clearly enjoying their little drama.

"I take it you've had an apprentice of your own?"

He spoke in an unnatural tone, but Holo didn't see fit to prey on him anymore.

"In a way.. I am Holo the Wisewolf, after all. Many have sought my knowledge."

"I see."

Lawrence didn't realize that he had unconsciously revealed that he was impressed. Surprisingly, Holo reacted with embarrassment. Was she just exaggerating to compensate for picking on him so much?

"It may be a stretch to call them my 'apprentices', though that is indeed what they fancied themselves. And yet it was I, the leader of the pack, whom newcomers always sought.. though they waited in line with a hundred others."

Holo wore her pride on her sleeve as she spoke, but Lawrence couldn't just smilingly accept her words. Indeed, she was great. But given the times they'd shared it didn't seem to stand up to scrutiny for her to be *that* respected.

She cried. She laughed. She became angry. She often behaved like a child. For anyone to tell her she was higher than the clouds seemed more like empty patronizing than a fact to believe.

While his mind drifted, Holo's face had turned into a gentle smile. She took his hand.

"Of course, you have never sought me for my knowledge. You are the rare kind of stupid mule who instead tries to grasp my reigns.. as improbable as that is, given that you cannot hope to climb to the mountaintop where I gaze out in boredom at this world."

Being a god who receives nothing but praise.. surely that would be lonely. When they first met, she had told him that she traveled in search of friends. She had worn a smile, but it was a lonely smile.

"Yet still you keep trying, do you not?"

It was always difficult to tell if she was teasing him, but being faced with a lonely smile he could not picture it. As she noticed the wry smile he wore, hers was replaced with anger. But he placed his hand on her shoulder and pulled her closer. She sighed in his arm, and finally seemed satisfied.

"Although now.."

Holo shifted slightly so she was looking up into his eyes.

"I am more happy to look up at *you* like this."

A cute girl was raising her eyes to look up to him. But it was Holo, so of course there was no way to accept it.

"How stupid I must look from that angle."

Seeing him reply with such a dissatisfied frown seemed to make her content. She held him tightly.

If Holo flicked her tail and commanded all of the insects within it to flee, they would surely flee.. at least, that was how he felt given his own respect for her. But even her most faithful apprentice would have trouble calling her "master" after seeing her like this. What a farce of a conversation. "But, if this is what she wants.." he silently rationalized.

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A sudden stirring was heard on the other side of the boat. Lacoza slowly rose, with odd marks on his face likely caused by sleeping on his arm. He stretched, spotted Lawrence and Holo, laughed, and yawned.



Lawrence peered ahead in the direction they were headed. A bridge spanned the river up ahead. Any traveler passing it would inevitably have to pass through a toll booth.

It was still quite far away, but he had no trouble discerning that from experience no matter how sleepy he was. Sailors were said to similarly understand their situation by the smell of the water alone. Was Lacoza the same?

As Lawrence's mind drifted, Lacoza jabbed his oar into the river and shouted out, startling Holo out of her slumber.

"We're coming up to the toll-bridge of the new Duke, D'Jean. Your boarding fee already includes the tariff. I hear he's a keen hunter of deer, so his tariff's a bit steep."

Lawrence failed to grasp the relationship between the two, so he asked. Lacoza smiled and replied.

"The Duke was never in any battles, but he fancies himself the world's best archer. He figured he could bag one deer per arrow."

Lawrence felt sympathy for the retainers that would have to follow the Duke on his hunts. But fellow hunters would probably be living comfortably under his rule.

Thinking about such a man conjured up the image of the type of fat and bumbling lord that would make royalty laugh.

"Ah, I see. I guess his retainers must be worked half to death."

"Rumor has it he's been trying to catch the eye of a princess.. so he's probably just beginning to realize which league he's really in."

Such lords could be very flawed, yet welcomed due to their eccentricities. Prideful lords who were ignoramuses were of course despised, but ones who generated such lively discourse were quite endearing.

A lord could listen to their peasantry, they could even run themselves ragged, but they would be unable to satisfy everyone. It was a difficult trade-off to manage. Lacoza may have spoken with scorn, but his open willingness to pay the tariff nonetheless attested to that fact.

Even a fool of a Duke like D'Jean might be a better leader than most when push came to shove

and his land was threatened. Creating an air that things would be worse off without him was a better approach than issuing edicts from a pulpit. It dawned on Lawrence that he was on a boat with the perfect example, and he instinctively looked at Holo.

"You seem to have something to say."

"No, not at all.."

Lacoza gradually slowed their boat as they approached another at the upcoming pier. It seemed there was some sort of argument taking place between the sentries and someone else. They couldn't make out that argument, but heard the other party let loose a distinct roar. Even the boatman ahead of them took notice and craned his neck to get a better look.

"How rare."

Lacoza shielded his eyes with his hand and spoke freely, as if half talking to himself.

"Wonder if it's that the tariffs' too steep? Nah.. it's them comin' in from the sea who ought-ta really be mad. Payin' for horses to pull their boats upstream, then havin' to pay again here.."

Lawrence first stole a glance at Holo, who was hiding her fangs while yawning. Then it struck him that something seemed odd about Lacoza's statement.

"But, isn't it the same for river-folk, not just those from the sea?"

He gently knocked Holo on the head for using his coat to dry her watery eyes. Lacoza yanked his oar from the water and laughed.

"This is home to us river-folk, so it's just like payin' rent.. nothin' worth fussin' about. But to those from the sea, the river's just a road. Havin' to pay over and over's sure to get 'em good and mad."

Lawrence nodded in appreciation of that notion.

The situation at the pier was starting to come into focus. A teenager, the one who had roared moments ago, was arguing with the sentries. He was panting, his breath like lily-white smoke. He spoke with a prepubescent voice.

"But this is the seal of the Duke's family!"

He was clearly quite young, perhaps 12 or 13 years old. His loose hair was covered in mud or dust, as was the rest of his face. His filthy appearance aside, he was thin enough that he might be the one to fall if he bumped into Holo.

His tattered clothes seemed ready to be blown away by a sudden wind. On his tiny ankles were flat-soled shoes. He might have even passed as a wizened and respectable scholar, if he was old and sported a proper mustache. He held a piece of parchment in his right hand while staring at the sentries.

"What happened?"

Holo asked unhappily, finally awake.

"Not sure. But you must have heard what he yelled, right?"

She yawned once more.

"Even I cannot do so while I sleep."

"Oh right, nothing can get past the snores-"

He found himself kicked away before he could finish. But before he could express his resentment, one of the sentries finally raised his voice while raising his spear.

"T'is but a fake! I shan't repeat myself again! If you persist, we shall reward you accordingly!"

The boy sucked his lip, as if he would burst into tears.

Lacoza's boat finally came to a rest behind the one they had been drifting toward. Apparently it's oarsman and Lacoza were on familiar terms. They greeted one other and proceeded to whisper among themselves.

"So what's with the ruckus? Is it one of Uncle Lalon's apprentices?"

Lacoza pointed his chin at another, older boatman with white hair ahead of them.

"If that were the case, Lalon wouldn't just be sittin' there on his boat."

"Right you are, haha! Maybe he's..?"

The boy paid them no mind. His shoulders and legs were trembling - from cold or anger one couldn't tell - while he stared at the parchment in his hands. He didn't seem willing to give up, but when he raised his head and saw the spear in front of him he could only step away. He backed away slowly, step by step, then finally sat down at edge of the pier.

"Our apologies! Please, resume your payments."

Upon the sentry's announcement, the boats began to move once again. Given their lack of real interest, perhaps this situation wasn't so out of the ordinary.

The disheveled boy still held his parchment. When Lawrence caught a glimpse of a red seal upon it, he immediately realized what had happened. The boy had been deceived by some shady businessman.

"Then he was cheated?"

"Yes."

As Lalon left the pier, Lacoza's friend inched ahead to the booth. Lacoza trailed closely behind. Lawrence spoke into Holo's ear, while carefully matching the rhythmic movements of the boat.

"These things happen. A counterfeit certificate, perhaps a payment notice from a landlord. Maybe even a fraudulent certificate to collect river taxes."

"..."

Such fakes normally sold at a higher price than the profits their real counterparts could possibly bring in. Still, the uninformed commonly fell for such traps.

"The poor soul.."

Boats had been queuing up on the water. Due to the wasted time the sentries were frantically collecting tariffs, having completely forgotten the boy. As Holo said, he appeared poor. But if he had used his brains, he would not have been swindled.

"Perhaps this will be a good lesson for him."

Upon hearing that judgment, Holo shifted her gaze from the boy back to Lawrence.

"I hope you aren't insinuating that I'm unsympathetic?"

"Says the one who sought help from everyone when he was blinded by greed."

Hearing it put so bluntly made Lawrence uncomfortable, but he would be breaking his principles as a merchant if he reached out to the boy.

"I sought help with my own two feet."

"Huh."

"I'd like to think I'm not malicious enough to turn away the hand of someone begging for aid. But if they won't even ask, they have no future regardless of outside assistance. They ought to join a church and become a monk."

Holo seemed caught up in her thoughts about the boy being poor. She probably agreed with Lawrence, but then she had helped an ungrateful village with their harvests.. she was simply that kind. Perhaps it was a dominant trait of hers to aid those in need. But in truth, such a quest would never end. The unfortunate lay in every corner of the world; the gods were few.

Lawrence pulled his blanket over his face and whispered.

"So, if he stands up on his own two feet, perhaps I'll.."

Holo might be kind, but she also understood the ways of the world. "Surely she understands my intent", he thought. The boy was undoubtedly poor. The moment Lawrence laid eyes on him, he suspected the boy had not just poor eyes, but poor ears.

"Master!"

Out rang a shout. Everyone present was accustomed to being in a marketplace. They could pick out the source of a like that even from within a crowd. The boy had taken to his feet, ignoring the sentries' attempts to stop him. He ran along the pier, and the target of his voice was none other than Lawrence.

"Master! It's me! ***It's me!***"

"What the..?"

"Oh, thank god, it's great to finally find you! After all that trouble just to find food, what luck!"

Unlike his happy words, the boy's face betrayed that he was a nervous wreck. Lawrence shot him a stare, then searched the memories of all the faces he had known in the past. It was true: he had never met this boy before. Was this how he had survived so far?

Still, Lawrence realized the boy was gambling on him. As did the sentries, who pinned him to the ground with the handles of their spears.

"Insolent whelp!"

A bridge was like a gate - a symbol of it's lord's power. The lord's reputation would be tarnished if such a farce was permitted. He would likely only be tossed into the river, but his blue eyes were fixed on Lawrence as if saying "If I fail here, I might as well be dead."

Lawrence stared in admiration. He wasn't even breathing when Holo finally poked him in the belly. She had turned her face away from the spectacle, but Lawrence could plainly interpret her expression: "Surely you have not forgotten what you just said."

The boy had stood up on his own two feet, and sought his help.

"You dare tarnish the name of Duke D'Jean?"

Boats continued to queue up behind one another. The sentries' wrath was justified, as they could be punished for failing to collect tariffs. They could hardly tolerate this. One of them pulled his spear away from the boy and raised his leg to kick him in the abdomen.

"Please hold!"

Lawrence bellowed just as the sentry was releasing his kick. The man's leg couldn't stop, but thankfully it only ended up slightly nudging it's target. A frog-like voice whimpered in response nonetheless.

"He *does* seem familiar to me."

The sentry momentarily glared at Lawrence before pulling his leg back. But the two guards seemed to grasp Lawrence's intent almost immediately. They glowered at the boy and

Lawrence in disapproval, then pulled their spears away with a sigh.

The boy's act was painfully transparent. His eyes were shining in amazement at having found someone with such an open heart. He didn't seem to believe his act had succeeded, and blinked several times incredulously. But he then jumped up and immediately boarded Lacoza's craft.

Upon paying the tariff, Lacoza paused while tightening the string on his money-pouch. He had eyed the boy as he boarded, making it obvious that he intended to be paid. His eyes met Lawrence's and they understood each other without having to waste words.

"We've many boats in line! Go!"

The sentry barked his order, and waved Lacoza and his passengers through. Clearly they were glad to be rid of the boy, but now they indeed had quite the queue to deal with. Lacoza shrugged at Lawrence before climbing back aboard and lifting his oar. As long as he got paid..

The boy must have been exhausted or terrified, as upon reaching the front of the boat he collapsed. Holo then shot an unhappy look at Lawrence.

"It seems I wasn't malicious after all."

She finally smiled upon hearing that, crawling out of the blanket and placing her hand on the body of the boy at her feet. Holo never did tire of egging Lawrence on. Even now she behaved like a gentle nun as she tended to the boy. By contrast, Lawrence appeared blunt and ruthless, a real stickler to his principles.

Seeing that the boy was unharmed, Holo made him sit up and lean against the side of the boat. Lawrence passed her a cup of water. He noticed the boy was still clutching the fraudulent document.. such outstanding determination.

"Come, drink some water."

Holo tapped the cup of water against the boy's shoulder. His eyes slowly opened. He had appeared to be passed out, ragged and limp. He studied Holo and Lawrence while he drank. A smile of embarrassment spread across his face. Lawrence found himself unable to ignore the boy as he originally intended.

"Thank.. you."

Was he thanking him for the water, or for his part in that pathetic drama? In either case Lawrence was embarrassed as well. He didn't know if he should be rewarded with thanks for being so un-businesslike and acting before he considered profit or loss.

The boy was clearly parched. He drank the cold and icy water, coughed several times, and breathed deeply in satisfaction. He certainly did not appear to be from Lenos. There were other villages along the river, so perhaps he had walked North or South to get here. It could not have been a pleasant journey with such old and tattered shoes.

"Please sleep until you feel better. Will this blanket do?"

It was the spare Lawrence and Holo brought with them. The boy was ecstatic to have one, and vigorously nodded.

"God bless the two of you.."

He fell asleep as soon as he rolled up in the blanket. Without it, sleep would probably be impossible. He was thin, as were his tattered clothes.. without a blanket he could easily freeze to death. Holo seemed concerned until the moment she heard him breathing peacefully. A look of relief came over her, a gentle face that Lawrence had never seen before. She gently brushed her hand across the boy's brow before standing up and facing Lawrence.

"Would *you* like to be caressed like that?"

Lawrence wasn't sure whether her teasing was just to shift her embarrassment onto him. He shrugged and replied.

"It's a special right reserved for children."

On cue, she smiled.

"And you are but a child in my eyes."

As they sparred the boat began to slow down. Lacoza nearly ran into the boat ahead, so strong was his interest in the new passenger. He set down his oar and checked up on them.

"Damn. So he *is* fine, huh?"

Holo nodded. Lacoza scratched his face and sighed.

"He's likely been had. It's been quiet for once, but usually in the winter a bunch'a suspicious folk show up from the South. Maybe two years ago there came a shady one good at forging papers. Proper merchants were had, not just kids. We all learned fast, so it's rare these days. They likely got to the boy."

Lawrence carefully stole the parchment from the boy's hand still outside the blanket. He spread it open to study it. Indeed, it seemed to be document from Duke Holmann te D'Jean, authorizing the collection of tariffs upon the Roam river.

Elegantly-worded and beautifully-penned documents were not enough on their own. Even bearing many difficult-sounding words, convincing someone of their authenticity wasn't simple: anyone who had seen the genuine article could tell at once if it was a forgery. Of course, the most important bit of evidence would be the signature seal of the Duke.

"Lacoza, how would you spell Duke D'Jean's full name?"

"Uh.. it's.."

Comparing against Lacoza's spelling attempt, Lawrence confirmed there were two silent letters being used on the certificate.

"Then this signature may actually be a copy.. if it's that precise, the forger is headed for the gallows."

It was an interesting legal quirk. Forging the Duke's actual signature so precisely, rather than using an obvious fake, was a serious crime.

Lacoza shrugged. Lawrence rolled the parchment back up and placed it into the boy's blanket.

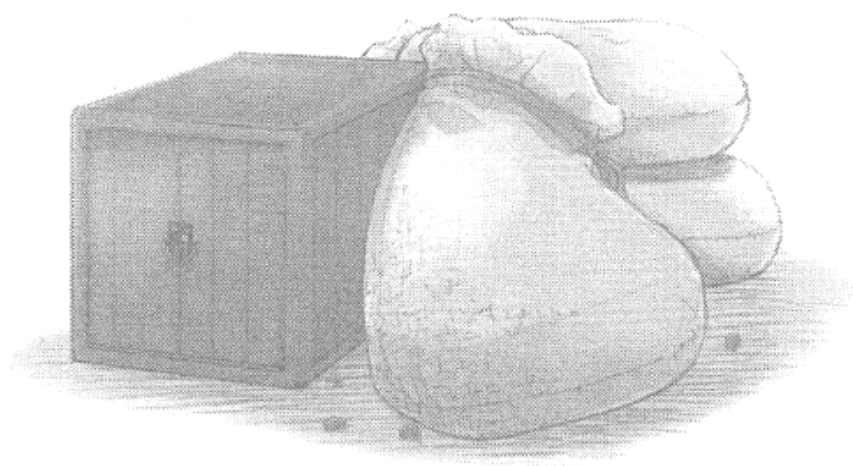
"I *do* still expect to be paid for haulin' him around."

"That's.. yes, of course."

If Holo heard him say it she would probably get angry, but in the end it was true that almost any problem could be solved with money.

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Chapter 2

The boy said his name was Cole Todd. After he rested, his stomach grumbled even louder than Holo's, so Lawrence broke off some bread and gave it to him. Cole ate it like a wild dog while observing the people around him. His manner wasn't rude, he truly was like a dog abandoned by its master.

"So tell me: how much did you spend on those documents?"

Cole had revealed he met a traveling businessman with many certificates, not just one or two. He had untied the sack he brought aboard with him and inside were a number papers, probably enough to bind into a book.

He wolfed down the bread - which was the size of his fist - in two bites before answering with his mouth half-full.

"One Chaney.. about eight Lute."

So he'd been able to afford paying a Chaney silver coin. But judging by his clothes it was all the money he had. He had gambled everything.

"It seems you didn't really think before you bought them. I take it this 'businessman' was wearing expensive clothing?"

But it was Lacoza, not Cole, who replied.

"Nah.. probably he had shabby clothes, and no right arm, huh?"

Cole nodded, obviously surprised.

"A famous act, that one. Sells papers everywhere. Probably told you he risked his arm to get 'em, and that he wanted to sell 'em before his boat left for home?"

The pupils in Cole's eyes shrank down to tiny dots. Lacoza was right on the money. Successful con jobs were imitated precisely, so this man likely *had* lost his arm (as punishment for other acts of fraud, no doubt). Stealing money would cost you some fingers. Fraud? An arm. Murder? Your very head. Or worse, you could be hung - even being beheaded was preferable to that.

Cole's realization that he had been cheated by a huckster left him depressed. His head hung low, arms hanging at his sides, while he stared at the deck of the boat. While reading the papers, Lawrence continued his assault.

"Can't you at least read?"

"A little.."

Cole's lack of confidence was obvious.

"But this stack of papers.. at least half of them aren't even certificates for anything!"

"But.. then.. what are they?"

Unexpectedly, Cole kept his cool. Lawrence was impressed. Perhaps Cole had once been in the care of a good master. This was quite a contrast to his earlier explosive behavior. His face looked like the saddest, most pathetic thing in the entire world. Perhaps he looked a little *too* pathetic.. Holo handed him the rest of the loaf of bread.

"They're just assorted documents from some chamber of commerce. See? This one's just an exchange rate form."

Lawrence purposely tried handing the document to Holo as he spoke. She could read, but didn't care about exchange rate forms, so she wouldn't accept it. Lawrence then turned to Cole and handed it to him. Cole also refused. He clearly didn't want to look his own failure in the eye.

"I come across such documents all the time. You can't make anything from them directly, you have to know who'd be interested in buying them. So after they were stolen they were probably just handed off from one person to the next."

"Hmm.. I *did* hear a rumor that some papers were lost.."

Lacoza corroborated the idea while he adjusted their course slightly to the right.

"..but who'd wanna risk *stealing* 'em?"

"Probably just some worker the chamber was firing. He grabbed what he could and ran before they could throw him out. Even if he couldn't find a business rival to sell them to at a high price, he could always sell them to a fraudster before skipping town. Pretty clever; if they stole money

the chamber would hunt them down. But they'd not risk their reputation by chasing him over such documents.”

“Why not?”

“If they wanted them that badly, it might be because they were keeping shady secrets. Not the kind of suspicions a chamber of commerce wants raised.”

It was quite a tidy conclusion.. even Holo nodded in agreement.

Lawrence hadn't just been talking, he was busily analyzing the papers. There were some interesting bits of information about the purchases made by different chambers.. not information that one came by easily. To Cole these papers were worthless, but to Lawrence they might be worth as much as twenty Lute coins.

“Yours was certainly the classic 'mistake born from ignorance'. You've no money even for this boat ride, let alone food. But I'll help. I'll buy all of these from you.”

Though Cole's eyebrows did raise, his head did not. He kept his eyes fixed on the deck of the boat. He was obviously thinking it over. There might be some papers there that were worth a lot, but finding a buyer wasn't easy. And he'd already spent a silver coin to buy them..

Just like how Holo would tell Lawrence she could read his thoughts, he could easily do the same when it came to thoughts about profit and loss. Though not by using facial expressions and reactions like Holo did – he could simply tell from experience.

“For how much?”

Cole raised his head with a very determined look. He probably thought he had to show confidence or he'd be given a bad price. Lawrence wanted badly to laugh, but managed to keep his no-nonsense expression by coughing before he replied.

“Ten Lute.”

“Hooo.. too little..”

Cole replied with a deep breath while frowning slightly.

“Is that so? Then I guess you can have them back.”

Lawrence pushed the pile of documents back to Cole without hesitation. His mask of determination crumbled. The face now exposed was even more pathetic than the one he had before he put the mask on.

Holo glanced at Lawrence, then the documents. Lawrence's mouth was tightly shut. Cole had tried to raise the price and ended up with nothing. Not even the most convincing mask in the world would persuade Lawrence to buy them now.

Cole had to think calmly, even with Holo and Lacoza watching them. If he could exploit his weak appearance, he could win another opportunity. A trader had to be able to give up their pride and self-esteem in order to earn their keep. That was the harsh reality of business.

But of course, Cole was no businessman. And he *was* just a child. So Lawrence eventually pulled the stack of documents back and scratched his chin.

“Twenty. But no more.”

Cole's eyes opened so wide they began to water, but he immediately lowered his face again. Perhaps he felt that revealing his happiness would count as a loss. He was clearly relieved, but Lawrence pretended to see none of it. Instead he stole a glance at Holo, who was gnashing her teeth slightly as if to say “Stop bullying him.”

“Then please.. take them..”

“But this shan't be enough to get you to Gerube with us. You'll either have to get off halfway or..”

Lawrence then looked to Lacoza, who was gleefully being entertained by all of this. Lacoza gave a hearty laugh and spoke.

“Oh my.. let me think.. I guess I could find you some work on this trip. Wanna help? I'll pay you a salary?”

Cole gazed about randomly like some lost puppy before finally he finally nodded.

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There were actually quite a few toll bridges along the river. It was quite frustrating. Of course

one could understand why they were there – it was easy money - but it doubled their travel time.

Not to mention that wealthier lords would build piers along the riverbanks, where boats docked to exchange cargo. The more heavily-trafficked bridges even had stalls and shops to serve the sailors. In fact they were more like small villages than mere bridges. All of these distractions only slowed them down further. They began to understand why it was sometimes said that taking a boat could seem slower than walking on foot.

Lacoza's cargo had to be delivered quickly, but time wasn't as essential for him as it was for boats hauling fur to Gerube. Those boats would pay more than necessary, and accelerated hastily past Lacoza in their bid to reach Gerube as soon as possible.

“At this rate is it even *possible* to catch that fox?”

Holo, who was awake but still reclining on Lawrence, softly voiced her complaint. She had been lethargic during the entire boat ride, and had been worried she was ill. But upon reflection it was only because of the anxiety she had just experienced at the Delink Trading Company. Shedding tears truly did leave one exhausted.

After simply passing a number of bridges, Lacoza had finally stopped at one for an appointment with someone. He was all business with the man, rushing to them, then calling out for Cole to start unloading their cargo. Still, all the while many boats were passing them by.

“At any rate this is still faster than taking the cart.”

Holo replied, while eyeing the pile of documents Lawrence was now reading.

“Really?”

The boat rocked gently like a cradle. It was easy to get sea-sick. Traveling by boat was actually quite tiring. It seemed counter-intuitive, but it was true.

“Quite hard-working for such a scrawny thing.”

“Uh.. ahh!”

Holo was referring to Cole while watching him clumsily pile goods on the pier. She was right; Cole didn't talk back to Lacoza, but only did as he was told. He couldn't lift the crates full of

wheat, but was managing to move the ones with beans.

He certainly didn't look anything like the boy who desperately called Lawrence "Master!" like he was facing death. Moments of desperation really tested one's inner strength.

"Of course. Having been fooled by such a cheap trick, no doubt he wants to regain his confidence."

He'd wasted all of his money on worthless documents. Those who were tricked always suffered a loss of confidence.

"Someone losing all their confidence after being swindled.. where have I heard that before?"

Lawrence didn't reply, focusing instead on reading the documents.

"Are any of them interesting?"

"Hmm.. yes, several."

"Such as..?"

Holo trailed off, her attention suddenly stolen by something on the pier. Lawrence instinctively looked as well, and saw a mule being flattened by the weight of the goods on it's back. Lacoza and Cole's handiwork, no doubt. It was like a comedy, but it drew Holo's sympathy.

"Well, such as this one. It's an order for copper coins."

"Coins? As in, purchasing coins? Like that other time?"

"No, this time they're buying out of need. See, they're spending more than the market price, and it even states that 'the shipping fees and tariffs are to be paid by us'. It seems to be something they do regularly."

"Wait.. I have heard of this.. what was the reason.."

Holo frowned and closed her eyes. There were of course other reasons to buy coins than currency speculation. And if they were intentionally taking a loss, there should only be one reason. Holo raised her head and smiled.

“Got it! They need change, right?”

“Oooh.. you're right on the money this time.”

Lawrence had to resist laughing out loud when she reacted so proudly to this kind of praise.

“Exactly. They must be buying coins to use as change for their customers. If a salesman doesn't have enough change for their customer, they'll probably lose the sale. But the coins do end up leaving town with those customers and traveling businessmen. Hmm, these coins they ordered will probably be sent through Gerube's harbor. Oh, did you know? The small island kingdom of Winfield is famous for not minting too many coins, so their money is sometimes called 'mouse currency'.. funny, huh?”

Holo gave such an adorable reaction to his trivia that he felt like poking her nose in delight.

“Like when there's a war, or a country is otherwise unstable, coins end up leaving the country together with it's emigrants.. just like mice abandoning a sinking ship.”

“I see.. what a nice metaphor.”

“Isn't it? I'd like to find out who thought of it- Oh?”

During their idle banter, Lawrence noticed something interesting about the order receipt.

“The name of this company.. why's it so familiar?”

Where had he seen it before? Just as he was processing that thought, a sharp cry was heard on the pier. Lawrence's attention was pruned away as he looked to the source of the cry. There was Lacoza, holding Cole up by his shirt like a cat, keeping him from falling into the river. Others were having a good laugh while Cole smiled in embarrassment.

He really did seem like a good kid after all. Holo was right about him.

“So.. what have you discovered?”

“Huh? Oh right.. the name of the company here is oddly familiar, like I've heard of them before. Did I just read their name in another of these documents?”



As Lawrence began frantically leafing through the pile of papers, the boat shook violently. Lacoza and Cole had finished unloading cargo and had returned.

“Well done! What a busy little worker you are!”

Holo welcomed the boy back aboard with a “hello” when he reached the front of the boat, causing his serious expression to melt away. He was indeed sharply curious, watching with obvious puzzlement as Lawrence shuffled through the papers.

“What a pity. None of these papers are worth any money.”

Lawrence spoke purposely and didn't raise his head. He knew Cole would react by shrinking his body uncomfortably. Holo smiled menacingly at Lawrence and poked him in the shoulder, silently saying “no bullying.”

He realized Cole had to be hoping *some* of the papers would have some intrinsic cash value. He knew because in truth, Lawrence had one been in a position similar to Cole's.

“Ah, this must be it.”

“Oh?”

Lawrence had found the clean and well-penned document he was searching for. It was dated a year ago to the month.. a draft of a cargo manifest. Because even minor revisions to final records weren't permitted, pre-final drafts were used. And although they were called drafts, they were really no less precise than the final copies.

It's lovely penmanship clearly recorded goods, their quantities, and where they were headed. Since companies didn't have branches everywhere, it was a bit of treasure for a merchant to learn of their locations and contacts. It was like spying on the company's secrets with a mirror - but of course one needed to know what to spy for.

“Yes.. that clinches it, these papers have no cash value.”

“Oh no..”

Cole nervously turned away from the paper he and Lawrence had been scanning. Lawrence couldn't help but laugh. He sat up straight and handed the paper to Cole.

“Let's have a read.”

Cole stared at Lawrence for a moment, then turned to the paper.

“Follow along.. 'This record has been written by Ted Lenos of Jean's Company.'”

The boat was shaking, so Lawrence had trouble keeping his balance. Despite the cold he left the blanket to sit beside Cole. At first the boy was perplexed, looking up at Lawrence. But he quickly directed his attention to the paper. His pale blue eyes were childishly asking “What's next?”

“Origin: Port Gerube. Destination: Kingdom of Winfield.' Yes, that's right, *that* Winfield. The island across the channel. The home country of *that fox*.”

Lawrence was of course emphasizing for Holo. The ears under her hood twitched as his last sentence ended. They weren't exactly chasing Eve seriously, but Holo's emotions were unstable when it came to Eve.

“So this is a list of the goods sent from Gerube to the chamber of commerce in Winfield – though no actual name was given for the recipient. These goods being listed.. can you read them?”

Cole had mentioned being able to read “a little.” His eyesight did seem rather poor – he squinted and studied the letters for a time before his mouth finally opened.

“Wax.. glass bottles.. books.. pins? Iron plates.. uh, tin.. metalworks.. and Ai.. nee?”

“Ainee, a currency.”

“Ainee.. coins?”

“Right. You *are* a clever one, aren't you?”

Lawrence remembered the encouragement he felt when his master ruffled his hair in acknowledgment, so he ruffled Cole's hair – though far more gently than his own master would have. Cole seemed surprised, but sure enough a delighted grin spread across his face.

“Well, this paper might list goods and prices, but it won't fetch a price itself.. not unless it proves someones smuggling I suppose.”

“There's no way to know?”

“No, sadly, they wouldn't just write 'Record of Smuggling' in big, bold letters.”

“Oh..”

Cole nodded, returning his eyes to the paper.

“Then..”

“Hmm?”

“What's so special about this paper?”

He was puzzled as to why Lawrence would single this document out. Lawrence realized that had gotten sidetracked and chuckled at himself.

“Ah. Well, I noticed that it involved the shipment of coins made in Ploania for Winfield. If they're for change..”

Then it hit Lawrence. He sat up straight and raised his eyes. Holo, who had been staring at the pile of papers in boredom, shifted her gaze to him in surprise.

“What is the matter?”

“That paper I was reading before.. where is it?”

“Um.. it is this one.”

Holo picked the paper out and handed it to him. With the cargo manifest in his right hand, and the order form in his left, things finally fell into place. The dates were off by two months. The name of the company was the same. So the cargo manifest was for the shipment of their order of coins.

“Well that's a lucky coincidence.”

Now Holo's interest had been piqued, and she was too was reading the papers in his hands. Cole nervously observed the two of them from the other side of the boat.

The swindler who has lost his arm was based near the river, so the papers had to be from a company near the river as well. The two documents linked the fact that the order was made upstream, and shipped downstream. But that fact was trivial, the devil was in the numerical details. Merchants were like prophets when it came to such details.

“The quantities don't match..”

“Where?”

Holo confirmed, while Cole moved his face closer to the document – his eyesight was truly awful.

“See, here.. only fifty-seven crates were ordered, but sixty were actually shipped. Three were added.”

“And why is that so interesting?”

Lawrence had placed the documents side-by-side on the deck of the boat, pointing at the numbers in question. But this wasn't easy to explain.

“You don't see? Hmm.. well, the more coins a minter produces, the more profit they'll earn. And their profits are so vast that strict checks and regulations are put in place to carefully monitor things.. the lure of corruption is just too strong. Those checks and regulations always ensure they only ship what's actually been ordered.”

“But it is likely they will not be able to ship a large order all at once. Or perhaps a boat might lose some crates if there is a storm while shipping across the channel. Perhaps they are simply compensating for such an issue with a previous order.”

That sounded reasonable, but it should be impossible for them to simply add 3 crates without marking why. Of course Lawrence knew it might be something that simple.. but being suspicious was the natural response of a merchant.

“Yes, you might be right. In any case, it's just my intuition.. it's just seems too much of a coincidence.”

Holo shrugged.

“What I fail to grasp is why they count them by the crate and not by the coin.”

“Really?”

Lawrence couldn't believe she was serious, but Cole also seemed to be wondering the same thing. He shoed away his surprise, and chalked it up to the difference between business knowledge and common knowledge.

“Because they don't want to count them by the bag, of course.”

“Oh what a fine comedian you are.”

She and Cole laughed, then looked at one another. Business knowledge came from experience, and those experiences were often ridiculous.

“Seriously though, say they're shipping ten thousand coins. How long would it take to count them all? If they were in bags, you'd have to take them out and count them one by one. It would take someone a good half a day to do that.”

“Then why not use ten people?”

“Naturally. But two thieves are worse than one, and three are worse than two. If one person counts wrongly, you suspect that one person. But if ten count wrongly you have to suspect all ten. A manager becomes necessary, and regular business could grind to a halt.”

Holo nodded, and Cole crooked his neck. They were still unclear on the advantage of using a crate.

“Plus it's not as easy to notice if a bag is stolen on the voyage.”

“Using crates wouldn't make much of a different in that regard.”

“Oh! I, I understand!”

Cole's eyes lit up and he instinctively raised his arm. When he realized he had done so, the arm came back down and he acted like he had sheepishly given away a secret. Holo didn't seem to recognize it, but that was an action that only came naturally to students.

“You're a student?”

If that were true his curiosity, unexpected knowledge, and the contrast between his manners and his shoddy clothing could be explained.

Cole was aghast; he cowered and stepped back, his open-hearted attitude suddenly sealed away. Holo seemed to be at a complete loss as to what had happened. But Lawrence understood and just smiled calmly.

“It's alright. I'm just a traveling merchant, really it's ok.”

Cole trembled as he faced the smiled merchant. Holo still didn't understand, but she seemed to at least grasp the basic situation. She extended her hand to Cole, who had almost tripped over the side of the boat.

“My partner is not merely a traveling merchant; he is a very kind-hearted soul. There is no reason to fear him.”

A maiden's smile was worth far more than a man's. It also helped that Holo was quite a beauty. Cole only resisted momentarily when she grabbed his arm.

“Now now, cry not, you will come to no harm here.”

Lawrence had been preyed upon by Holo for so long that seeing her gentler side always came as something of a shock to him.. but watching her gently comfort Cole was entirely new.

Her frail-looking body made one instinctively protective of her, but it was she who was the Wisewolf - protector of villages for centuries and something of a god. Her magnanimity was nothing short of heroic.

“So, tell me.. why would they end up using crates?”

Lawrence knew that to calm him they would need to show their disinterest in the fact that he was a student, and Holo apparently realized this as well. She released the boy gently while asking that question.

Cole was still fearful but was gradually calming himself. He manned up, quietly dried his tears and raised his eyes.

“You.. you truly..”

“Yes, I swear upon it.”

As if Holo had just broken a spell, Cole deeply inhaled. Holo gave a thin smile – she seemed to still be lost in thought.

“Uh, right.. why they'd use a box..”

“Mmmhmm?”

“Well, because.. um.. using a crate.. you can tell how much it holds.”

Holo frowned.. it seemed Cole had gotten the better of her.

“Outstanding! That's correct, you can measure the volume of a crate in advance, then fill it with coins in a careful pattern. Since you know how big the crates and coins are, you can tell how many coins must be inside a properly full crate. If even one crate is lost, you can still tell how many coins were lost. No counters or managers are necessary, so it's quite beneficial.”

Lawrence then turned to Cole.

“I myself had to be told the answer.. it seems our little student really is a sharp one.”

Cole finally straightened up and smiled. Holo wore a disinterested expression so it was tough to tell if she had truly not known the answer. She was so kind she may have simply thought it impolite to up-stand the boy by answering herself.

“But well, three crates is a big deal, so this really is interesting.”

Lawrence directed his comment at Holo, who shrugged as if to say “I am so *desperately* bored with this *tedious* conversation.” It was enough for him to want to shout “Let's go get Eve!” to perk her back up.

“Um.. um..”

Cole interrupted them with pathetic noises instead of words.

“Um?”

“Why is it such a big deal?”

He wore a very interested and thoughtful expression, surprising Lawrence. Holo stole a glance at Cole, then back at Lawrence.

“Well, it's like proof they're making coins for some private use..”

Cole inhaled sharply in anticipation. Lawrence found himself smiling.

“..but that's just idle speculation.”

“Ah, sure..”

Cole lowered his shoulders in disappointment.

It was odd. Cole didn't seem to care at all about getting back his money from that swindler. Was it even his own money? Perhaps he borrowed the money from someone else? Lawrence turned to Holo, but she simply shrugged. She might be able to read one's thoughts, but one's memories were apparently safe from her intuition.

“Idle speculation sure does make for a great time-waster on a boat ride though, doesn't it?”

Cole nodded, still disappointed.

The boy had caused such a messy situation on the pier with the deed to collect river taxes. Then came his incredible gamble on Lawrence's kindness. He certainly was brave. He was also clever, obedient, and penniless. He seemed every bit a student.

Just as Lawrence had been keenly interested in the shepherdess he met near the Church city of Ruvineigen, he found himself intrigued by this boy. What did he experience to end up like this? Why would he buy these documents? Lawrence could hardly resist asking, though he knew it would probably cause Cole to close his heart to them.

Generally speaking, students were easily cheated by thieves, gamblers, and drinkers. There was no one easier to swindle than a wandering student with nothing but time on their hands. Cole was frightened, having probably just experienced how terrifying the world really was. So Lawrence put on his business smile and started his questioning.

“I hear there are different subjects for students.. what are you studying?”

Many wandering students were only students in name – they hardly took their studies seriously. But Cole was able to read so that didn't seem to be his case. Lawrence was tidying the pile of papers as Cole hesitatingly answered.

“Um.. Church law.”

“Oh?”

Church law.. how unexpected. Was Cole studying to become a priest?

Some were students only because they were wealthy and it was a good way to waste time. Others didn't want to succeed their family business due to dreams of greater fame. Still others didn't want to have to earn their name through hard work. Those students who genuinely wished to *learn* were surprisingly few.

Those studying Church law were a special case. They didn't want to become monks in abbeys, they wanted a job with the Church.. a hive of greed and cunning.

“But.. I couldn't afford the tuition..”

“So you were forced to quit?”

Lawrence cut in to lead the conversation, so he wouldn't have to wait all night to get anywhere. Cole nodded.

Students generally gathered together to hire a teacher and a room in some wealthy noble's manor. If they couldn't pay, they would be expelled.

One legend even had a would-be student ask a bird to listen in on lectures, to learn what the bird repeated to him. Of course such legends were no more credible than miracles.

Lecturers often wouldn't even answer questions unless they were paid extra. If a student wasn't wealthy or skilled enough to earn money, it would be very difficult to complete their studies.

“So where's this so-called school? Eric's?”

“No. Akent.”

Lawrence gasped, and Cole sheepishly looked at the floor as if scolded. Holo shot Lawrence a

resentful stare, but it was quite unjust - Akent was very far away. She patted Cole on the back in encouragement.

“My apologies.. it's just so far away.. it must have taken a long time to wander here.”

“..Yes.”

“Akent.. 'A place where sages and honest students gather, where only clear water flows. A place where apples, the fruit of wisdom, grow in the town square year-round, the exchange of ideas takes place in all four major languages, and thoughts connect everything down to the bottom of the sea. A paradise of truth of wisdom.' That's the sort of place Akent is.”

“What a marvelous town.. apples in every season! T'would truly be paradise!”

Cole seemed surprised by Holo's reaction; it seemed she was even going to lick her lips. He smiled. Of course no one could tell how exaggerated her words were. She *was* a Wisewolf, after all.

“Um.. that part's untrue..”

“What..?”

Holo stared at Cole with a distraught expression. The boy scrambled to comfort her - it seemed she had already won him over.

“But! Um.. there *was* a lot of different fruit in the shop windows.. even some really rare ones..”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, there was even this unbelievable-looking one with hair.. so big I could barely hold it, so hard we needed to crack it open with a hammer. But it's juice was sweet and tangy.”

A coconut, surely. It was a common sight in the south in the right season, packed aboard ships. Holo had conceivably never seen one. Given her imagination it might be best for her to *not* know how one looked. Lawrence had seen coconut products on sale, but never in their original intact, hairy form.

Holo looked at Lawrence. Her eyes shone with a greedy light – clearly not an act.

“Well.. I'll buy you one if we ever spot one.”

Coconuts were much rarer in the north than honey-pickled peaches – a very rare sight indeed. He should be safe making such an offer. But if they did spot one, he was done for.

“And, well, Akent's nothing like a paradise. There are always problems and arguments. Stealing is rampant in the inns; anyone spending a night will wake up robbed of everything. People fight over it all the time. And when it gets too hot outside, fires spring up as if out of nowhere.”

It was a place full of students with nothing to do, from Cole's age to Lawrence's. A place where even a sleeping pirate would be thieved. Lawrence's vision of Akent was clearly embellished. Still, Cole forced a smile and didn't seem willing to correct any further. A town with a school was energetic – but it was both good and bad energy.

“I did end up meeting a kindly teacher who was knowledgeable. I was taught much by him.”

“That must be true, you've an good vocabulary for your age. Well done.”

Cole was so adorable when he smiled in embarrassment that Holo also smiled.

“Then, what brought you all the way up here?”

Cole cast his eyes downward, though his smile remained.

“I.. was involved in a book deal.”

“A book deal?”

“Yes. My teacher's assistant said that my teacher was writing an addendum for a book, so I should buy a copy before the price went up. So..”

“You bought it.”

“Yeah.”

Lawrence skillfully wiped the emotions from his face. When a famous sage wrote an addendum for a book, the original version became a collector's item.

It was a common practice for publishers to ask a sage to write an addendum for an unpopular

book. They would recall all of the original copies, then re-release them with that new addendum.

Because of the recall, the original version became rare, and its value shot up dramatically with book collectors. Because of this, speculation on which author was writing an addendum for which book was common in cities near schools.. it could be a highly profitable venture.

But unlike fur or wheat harvests, book speculation was as wildly inaccurate as predicting the weather. No one wanted to front the risk. But Cole was a naïve young student trying to stay out of the city's problems.. he wouldn't have knowledge of such things.

In short, this was no “deal” – Cole had been used.

“I didn't have enough to pay tuition all the way to graduation. So I figured I should earn some money. And that book was getting more expensive everyday. I needed to buy it soon if I wanted to make any money. But I didn't have enough money, so I borrowed some from the assistant's businessman friend.”

The basic con would begin exactly like this, when a publisher was seen approaching a sage. One con artist would spread the rumor, while another would buy enough copies of the book to make the rumor seem credible.

As more and more people bought into the scheme, the value of the book would inflate, and the con artists could sell their copies to gullible newcomers for a tidy profit. It was only a gamble for them to know when to sell their copies to make the most money.

Lawrence expected Holo to be livid upon hearing this.. but she was gazing mournfully at the boy. Her behavior was making Lawrence increasingly uncomfortable.

“In the end, my teacher didn't write the addendum because of personal issues. The book suddenly got really cheap.”

Cole didn't even seem to understand that he was swindled. He was smiling while he recounted his story. But Lawrence could understand that it was exactly as he suspected. The boy was trapped. He had borrowed money to buy the book. He had no money for tuition or even room and board. He couldn't pay back what he had borrowed – he could only run away.

He had managed to wander all this way because the supporting ties between students were even stronger than the ones between merchants. Shiftless students were in every city, they

were easy to find.

Although schools were usually only found in the south, people could freely learn from street lecturers in big cities like Ruvineigen. It was a tough life for students, however, since winters were much colder.

“To.. to return the money, I begged everywhere. I finally ended up here. In the winter there should be a lot of people here so I could find a job, I thought.”

“You mean because of the annual northern expedition?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

So it turned out that the canceled expedition had hit Cole as well. No one had come, and there were no jobs. Just to survive the winter he'd have to spend all he had won by begging. And just when he needed help most, another swindler appeared.

Cole wanted to learn Church law, but instead their God had handed him a cruel defeat. Or to put it in the Churches' preferred terms, God had tested the boy.

“And after this difficult journey you finally came upon us.”

“Yeah.”

“T'would seem to be fate, no?”

Holo smiled and looked up at Lawrence. Cole's muddy face reddened slightly.

“Yours has been a miserably unfortunate journey, but one usually gains after such losses. There were many traps, but not all of them could be avoided. Not knowing is a sin, but t'is alright, you will be fine now.”

Had she no shame? Lawrence was astonished. She was clearly trying to pawn Cole off on Lawrence, while avoiding taking any responsibility in the matter.

“Not knowing.. is a sin..?”

“Quite. But t'is alright. My partner is quite an experienced businessman who-”

Lawrence hastily covered her mouth with his hand, his eyes half closed in a squint. A moment later he felt her fangs pressing against into his fingers, so he pulled his hand away and spoke on her behalf.

“*Your partner* has a partner who loves to talk. Surely *she* would enjoy sharing the boon of her wisdom and experience?”

“Oh? What a strange thing to say. T'would imply your own experience is less than that of a mere girl such as she.”

“You..”

Of course her identity was a secret, so he could not hope to debate her on this. Cole stared at them in puzzlement. Her eyes betrayed how much she was enjoying this, but also that she would stand firm in her resolve. She had fallen prey to her own sympathy. Lawrence empathized, but Cole's situation was not his responsibility.

It wasn't as if teaching alone was enough to help people solve their problems. They needed to learn how to spot traps in the wild, not just what those traps were. It wasn't a matter of a few days of tutelage. Holo surely knew that.. it must be exactly why she was doing this.

“Why is it that you are kind to me?”

Holo spoke into Lawrence's ear as she pulled it toward her face.

“Is it only because I am lovely? Are you so shallow a man?”

“What?”

Of course it was partly because she was lovely. Lawrence would openly admit that. But it was obviously not the only reason.

It seemed she was intent on pressuring him into teaching Cole, whether he liked it or not. She was staring at him.. he had no recourse.

“Alright, alright! Just.. let go of me.”

He had no desire to have one ear longer than the other. Holo finally released his ear and whispered into it.

“A good partner, you are.”

She then smiled happily and flicked that ear.

Lawrence sighed. This was all against his wishes, so he wasn't going to dignify her by looking at her. He badly wanted vengeance.. after all, Holo would slay him if he ever did this to her.

“And what does the little client say? Does he wish to learn?”

Lawrence stared at Cole. The boy looked like a puppy who just realized he had a potential new master in waiting. He was being given a chance. Though he was nervous, he was a clever one. He sat up tall, breathed deeply, then replied.

“Um.. uh, please teach me everything, I'll do my very best!”

Holo nodded, now satisfied. Of course she could afford to be relaxed – she wasn't the one who had to teach the boy.

Again Lawrence sighed. He had no real problem playing the role of a teacher, but it was normally such a tedious and boring affair. And it wasn't even his choice.. Holo wasn't just with him because she had a lovely face, after all.

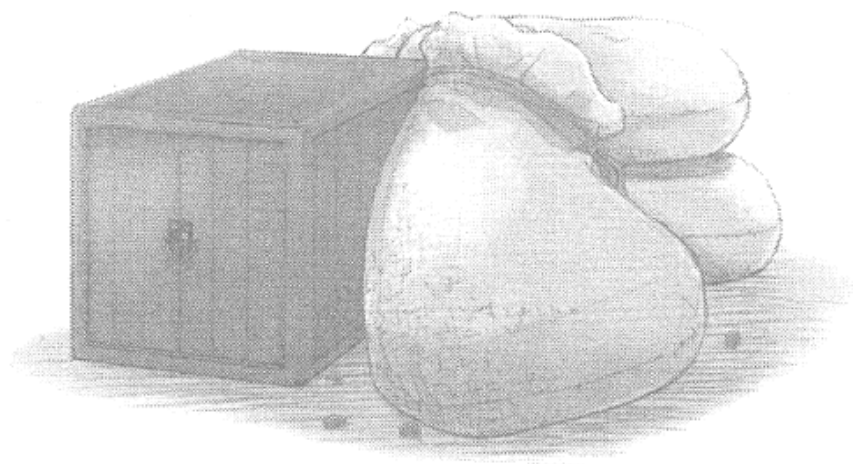
“I've no choice. We *are* all on the same boat after all.”

Just after Lawrence delivered his pun, the boat shook awkwardly. Cole's jaw dropped. Holo sighed. Lawrence was was doubly embarrassed. “I truly am awful at jokes,” he thought. As if in response, Holo spoke.

“Worry not, this is the foolish Lawrence that I like.”

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## Chapter 3

It would take forever to teach Cole all the different kinds of fraud. The boy really just needed to learn how to keep himself from being cheated.. and ways to earn money. If he wasn't greedy he wouldn't have any problems. Of course, many people found it quite difficult to not be greedy.

“When someone introduces you to a scheme to earn profit, you must consider what their angle is. You must think not only about what you could earn, but also what you stand to lose. Very likely, this line of thought will prevent you from being cheated.”

“But no matter what I do there will always be successes and failures, right?”

“Of course. But deals always promise big profits. If the profit-to-loss ratio is large, in either direction, you should err on the side of caution. Both cases are warning signs.”

“Even when the profit end is much higher?”

Cole certainly was the type of student who would be willing to pay for knowledge: a hardworking and sharp young lad. Lawrence wasn't happy to have to teach him, but at least he picked up on things quickly. It eased Lawrence's mind, and warmed him to the idea of teaching the boy.

“Your expression tells me you're having a hard time accepting that.”

“No.. um, well, yes.”

“In this world you must expect bad results, not good ones. You cannot expect good results when someone offers you a deal. Why not? There are many deals, but only so much luck to go around. Anticipating that luck will strike is no different from randomly pointing at a man and saying 'today will be your lucky day.' Now tell me, would such a prediction come true?”

Lawrence may have learned this wisdom from his master, but it felt more profound now that he was sharing it with others. It certainly was a golden rule to live by. If Lawrence had adhered to it, his travels with Holo would have been far less dangerous.

“So let's apply it to your situation.”

Holo seemed quite relaxed, listening in on their conversation. The playful smile she started off

with gradually melted into a purely happy one as she watched Lawrence seriously discuss things.

The boat ride was calm. It was cold, but it wasn't windy.

Things had changed for Lawrence now that he met Holo. He felt safe and comfortable traveling with her. It was unprecedented; he had never felt this way during his lonely travels, though he sometimes suspected that when the world was young there may have been a time where everyone was so carefree.

He taught Cole while rolling these thoughts around in his head. The Holo that wore a wicked smile was nowhere to be seen. The water's surface looked so cold, so whence came this warmth? He truly had no idea, but he could feel his body relaxing. His discussion with Cole also grew more relaxed. The boy understood his words, and Lawrence understood his questions.

Good luck might not come to him, but at least good people did. Just as that thought crossed his mind-

“Ha ha.. you guys are sure going at it.”

It felt like Lacoza's voice recalled him from a dream. Cole seemed to react the same way; he looked around, perplexed.

“Eh? What.. what's wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. Just that we're coming up to today's last bridge, so I wanted to check if you guys needed to buy anything for the night.”

“Oh, I see.”

Lawrence turned to Holo and asked her to confirm if they had enough food. If they would be sharing with Cole, they might not have enough.

“We should have enough.”

“Then we should be alright, Lacoza.”

“Alright, then that's that.. odd..”

Lacoza stretched, then leaned against a pile of crates. He put on a smile.

“Fruit born from lies, huh? Seems you've found an excellent student.”

Referring to Cole so clearly, the boy eyes quickly shot to the bottom of boat in embarrassment. Again. This from the same boy who proudly stood tall when being praised.

“I've hired several boys, but none lasted even a year. It's a marvel to find one who works without needin' a scoldin' or a knockin'.”

Lawrence replied vaguely.

“Perhaps.”

Wandering students were despised and avoided because of their mischief-making and lawless antics. They didn't work, they didn't achieve anything, they had no credit. Cole may have been strong-armed into working on this trip, but he demonstrated patience and a passion for learning. He was well on his way to earning everyone's trust. And, funniest of all, the boy didn't even seem to realize.

Holo seemed happiest of all.

“So anyway, there's more work to be done at the next bridge, but..”

“Oh! Please let me help.”

“Ha ha.. you'll get a scolding from your teacher if you behave like this.”

“Huh?”

Seeing the stupidly-confused look on Cole's face, Lawrence could only smile in disbelief before speaking.

“I doubt he wishes to become a boatman or a businessman, am I right?”

Cole's eyes widened dramatically, and he looked at Lawrence and Lacoza. One could plainly see him processing the question with the full might of his mind.

They may not be as invested in him as Holo was, but they still wanted to know his plans.

“...yeah. I still want to learn about Church Law.”

“Ah. A pity, that.”

“Just as I suspected.”

“Oh well, neither of us can stand a chance. We'd best give up and hand him over to God. God always wins.”

Lacoza sighed melodically and resumed smiling. He rose, then walked to the aft of the boat and retook his oar.

Those with talent were welcome in any occupation.

“Uh..?”

“Heh.. it's nothing. Just keep studying and you'll become a master soon enough.”

“Ah..”

Cole clearly didn't understand, but nodded anyway.

As their boat approached the pier, Cole was called to action. Lawrence, left behind, pondered over Lacoza's words. It was true, a god always won.

“You think it a pity, do you not?”

“Hmm? Yes, I suppose I do.”

“Well, you still have a chance with the boy.”

Surprised, Lawrence turned to her and spoke.

“Making an independent businessman out of me.. is that not enough for you?”

“You will not become one until you have found apprentices.”

Apprentices? Lawrence had told her that once he had a shop, his adventuring would be over. And now she was telling him to seek apprentices?

“No, it is still far too soon for me.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah.. in ten years, perhaps.. maybe even fifteen.”

A few years ago, it seemed a future far too distant for him to speculate on. But these days he could comfortably anticipate such things. It hadn't been possible when he felt the world was ahead of him, but his future was now slowly coming into focus.

“In ten years? Um.. by then even you will have become quite masculine.”

“What.. do you mean by masculine?”

“You truly wish to know?”

The return of her wicked smile indicated that she had prepared a potent weapon for this topic. Lawrence felt it was prudent to avoid it for once, so he held back his counter-attack.

“Oh ho.. how clever of you.”

“Why thank you.”

Holo smacked him on the shoulder and puffed up her face as if angry. He smiled in response and reached out toward the pile of documents. He'd been distracted, but now the case of the extra coins resurfaced in his merchant brain.

“You truly are a sordid merchant.”

“What?”

“Going straight back to the papers. Are they truly that much more interesting than conversing with me?”

Should he smile in disbelief? Surely if he said “You're jealous over paper?” he would get a thrashing.

“Why do you find it so intriguing that there are three extra crates?”

“That's a tough one.. I suppose such mysteries just delight me. But fear not, I've no mind to get caught up in any riots this time.”

He shuffled through the papers, and soon came across one from D'Jean Company. There should be others if he continued to look.

“..”

He sensed that Holo wanted to speak up, so he raised his head. She had seated herself back down, clutching the blanket in her hands.

Her tail was swishing under her robe - she was unhappy. Sometimes it seemed too easy to read her mind: “Cole came first, but now that he is gone I ought to be the first thing on your mind.” Lawrence couldn't help but wonder how much confidence he should place in that guess.

“Wanna help?”

“..perhaps. Not really.”

Lawrence was reminded of her coy dishonesty when she tried to get him to buy her apples. She wore a look of displeasure, but her ears seemed suspiciously happy.

“This name.. D'Jean Company.. I want to find the papers mentioning them. That won't bore you to tears, will it?”

“In all of them..?”

“Yes.”

Cole had bought quite a few documents. They had been carried in bags and by hand, so a number of them were rather crumpled. Some had fingerprints all over them, or had begun to fade. They were an assortment that had been written by many different people.

Lawrence handed Holo a number of the one hundred or so documents, and together they began a search for the D'Jean Company. Lawrence could classify the document in seconds, and knowing the type of document he knew where to look for the company's name. But to Holo the words required a great deal of focus.

It was plain to see that she was anxious, by how she would sometimes furtively steal a glance at him. She was never willing to admit that he was better at something than she was, so Lawrence pretended not to notice her and slowed himself down.

“But, you..”

“Hmm?”

Even if he slowed down for her, he was still faster. Was she asking him to slow down for her even more? Or was he just being overly sensitive?

Holo didn't continue to search while she spoke. She set the papers down and stared off into the distance.

“What's the matter?”

“No.. it is nothing.”

She shook her head and then stared at her paper in her hands. But no matter how brilliant her acting was, saying “nothing” like that would never work.

“You should try not to make it so obvious if you want attention.”

He worried she would get angry, but she seemed above that. She smiled as if chiding herself, then tidied her stack of papers.

“A silly question just crossed my mind.”

She finally picked up another page and slowly squinted her eyes at it.

“What might that be?”

“T'is truly silly.. I found myself wondering what it is like, this town we are headed to.”

Upon hearing this, Lawrence took a good look downstream. Not even the slightest signs of Gerube were visible yet.

He couldn't describe why, but he felt her voice was conveying something beyond simple words. Not to mention that when she called something “silly,” it was usually quite the opposite.

“I've only passed by it a few times. In fact I've never actually been in town before.”

“That is unimportant.. how does it look?”

If it was truly unimportant, Lawrence might as well humor her. He recounted his memories.

“Well, the river ends in a big delta. People don't actually live in town. There's mostly inns and company warehouses.. moneychangers and shops.. lots of people walking around. But all the homes are north and south of town along the delta. In fact, the whole delta's called Gerube, though the different areas have poor relations.”

“Oh. Oh.”

She was looking at the paper in her hands, but it seemed optimistic to think she was actually reading it.

“I was aboard a large trading ship traveling to far-away countries. Gerube was one of the ports we stopped at for supplies. The ship was too large to go near the delta – the water just wasn't deep enough. So we had to go between on smaller boats.”

He paused intentionally to observe Holo's reaction. His description would be a poor substitute for to seeing it for herself, he thought, but she seemed to feel otherwise.

“And what did you see on the delta?”

As he suspected, there was a paper in front of her eyes, but they were focused somewhere far behind it. Lawrence felt like he was leading a blind person through Gerube, describing the sights to her in detail. But he didn't dare speak his mind. She turned to him and pressed him to carry on. He warily continued to speak.

“Ahhh.. when we came up to the delta, we were first welcomed by the broken hulls of ships caught in a saltwater reef.. they reminded me of gates somehow. And beyond them, we came to a noisy and bustling market. But it wasn't a place with small retail shops, everything was being sold in large quantities. Put simply, it was a marketplace for merchants. Everything being shipped started it's journey there, maybe heading to some faraway country.. oh and yes, there were a number of entertainment houses for the sailors.. um.. so there is something to keep you happy, too.”

He ended with a shrug. Holo smiled in response.

“There were lots of huge inns pouring the sound of harps into the streets.. laughter, too.”

Holo nodded slightly, but didn't look up or move her head as she responded.

“And where did that ship go?”

“That ship? Which one?”

“The one you were on.”

“Oh, it went down south along the continent, ending up at a city named Joydas. It was a huge port.. there were lots of carpenters in Joydas. The ship mostly carried amber between the north and the south. Joydas is famous for amber crafts, you see. It's nearer to the southern tip of the continent than Pazzio, where we got lost in the tunnels, and Pasloe village, where we met. The seawater was warmer, but darker.”

He had taken that trip when he was younger and more relaxed, before he owned a horse and cart. Back then he valued wandering around more than life itself. But he didn't say that part.

Traveling by boat on a river was nothing like traveling by boat on the sea.. that was *far* worse. He had to bring with him a waterskin the size of an ox bladder, and hold it carefully so it wouldn't spill while aboard that shaky ship.

And shake it did. It shook so vigorously that those merchants unused to such treatment vomited repeatedly.. some so much that they wound up vomiting blood. All of them were weak and frail by the time the ship reached it's destination.

Lawrence was amazed at himself for making that trip three times.

“How lovely.. but.. what is amber?”

“You don't know?”

Asking so plainly put him on the receiving end of an angry stare. Lawrence suspected she might know, being a god from a forest, but since she didn't know about pyrite it stood to reason.

“It's a solid form of tree sap. It looks much like a precious stone.. much like.. hmm, your eyes,

for instance.”

He pointed at her face, then laughed when she crossed her eyes as if she was trying to use them to look at themselves.

“I did that on purpose.”

So she said, though of course she would never confirm whether it was the honest truth. He knew better than to point that out, so he continued talking.

“In any case, pieces of amber are pretty as gems.”

It then seemed to dawn on her that he was trying to compliment her. But she tolerated it, and smiled.

“Mmm! I see why you feel they are so lovely.. so what happened after you went ashore?”



“After that? Well..”

Lawrence found himself puzzled and stopped answering. Why was she asking this so intently?

“If you prefer, you can tell me more about where that fox is headed.”

He fumbled for a response. Did she believe Lawrence forgot why they were on this boat? No.. it seemed more likely that she was simply afraid of why he stopped talking.. afraid he would call her out on why she was questioning him?

“Where Eve's going? Well if she wants to process the fur and sell it, she'll probably end up going further south of Joydas even, to a town named Wulvan.”

“How much profit will she make?”

“She said it would be thrice the cost.. at least that. If she makes that much she'll never talk to a traveling merchant like me again.”

He smiled while saying that, but she hit him with her shoulder to show her dissatisfaction. But then, she didn't look at him, as if she was worried that doing so would reveal her true thoughts.

“Hahaha.. I'm certainly not joking! If she earns a thousand or two gold coins she'll immediately qualify as an upper-class merchant. With that much money she could open a store, buy a ship, and haul in goods from distant lands..

“Gold from deserts, spices from the tropics, silk, glassworks, rare books recording the history of fallen empires, inconceivable foods and animals, even pearls, coral, precious stones from the ocean.. all shipped in large quantities. A single haul like that, if it makes it home, is worth ten or even twenty times what a traveling merchant like me will earn in their lifetime.

“Such a company eventually opens branches in distant lands, then chambers of commerce and perhaps even banks. They lend money to lords, win special privileges from them, and eventually come to indirectly control the very economy of those lands. Lastly, and most sweetly, the owner of such a company can be appointed the imperial merchant of some Emperor in the south.

“The Emperor would order a crown worth twenty or thirty Lumione gold coins, and the merchant could sit back and command the shipping of goods between nations. Wherever he went, he'd be treated like a king. Maybe even make himself a throne out of coins.”

This golden dream was one shared by every businessman. It seemed an amusingly ridiculous dream to most people, but in fact many an ambitious man had made exactly that same journey.

However, not even God might know how many of the losers, victims and dead lay on the road to that ambition. Eve had a shot at it now, but it wasn't a smooth ride to that future.

Trading between distant places earned much profit, because it was difficult for a ship to safely make such trips. Lawrence knew many merchants who went bankrupt investing in cargo that wound up on the bottom of the sea.. more merchants than fingers on his hands.

“It's a golden path to a golden world.”

Lawrence didn't know if Holo understood the implications of it all, but had he related it like some wonderful daydream. She seemed very happy as she replied.

“And yet, you seemed to have no regrets about missing the turn onto that golden path.”

He nodded. He hadn't regretted it one bit. He honestly didn't want to find that path. In his heart he felt that he was already traveling on such a road together with Holo.

On a path so full of tricks and traps, one took a chance they wouldn't end up tempted by the devil, succumbing to various evils, and hiding in the shadows in a bid to reach the top. It was the kind of story discussed for centuries, the kind that was normally called an “adventure.”

Competing with mighty merchants with gold, schmoozing with royalty and discussing their lineage, doing battle aboard large ships with pirates, winding up betrayed by trusted companions and subordinates.

Lawrence sometimes imagined the happiness he would feel to share such an adventure with Holo. But somehow he felt that Holo would hate it. But he might as well ask her now.

“Does that mean you'd like to take that path?”

She didn't nod. She simply put on an indifferent expression that said “not interested.”

“I shall be sharing your story with many.. t'would be better if t'were briefer.”

Such a sharp wit.. Lawrence couldn't help but laugh voicelessly while she stared at him. A

shorter story being better - of course that was a lie. If someone was describing Holo's sleeping face, he would instantly want to outdo them with a fancier description.

“I have no interest in this golden path. But I am curious where you have been after that city of amber.”

Those weren't trips worthy of being called adventures. They were just the regular travels of Lawrence the merchant. Why would she want to know about those? The reason seemed clear now. He felt it when telling her about the Gerube delta; once put into words, things were put into perspective.

But he smiled and didn't confirm that with her. He continued telling his tale. In the amber city, he traded some animal teeth and bones he'd brought from further north for salt and pickled herring. He sold those elsewhere in the inner continent, sometimes walking, sometimes hitching rides on horse-drawn carts.

He sometimes teamed up with others, passing through plains or rivers. He got lost in forests, sometimes fell ill or was harmed. He felt relief when seeing a merchant rumored to be dead. He laughed upon hearing such rumors about himself.

Holo was listening to him intently and silently. She looked like someone who hadn't seen the extent of the world for hundreds of years. He spoke of things so common it was comical.. but she still seemed surprised to hear them. She almost seemed to be imagining herself sitting next to him on those old travels.

After a time, Lawrence came to the time he had traded salt in a mountain village for mink fur. At that point he stopped, worried he might break their unspoken rules if he continued. Holo had been leaning against him, holding his hand, in a daze. He had walked through two years of his past with her. It had been a long and typical trip.. she had probably grown weary of listening.

His next trip was a rather surreal one, in a certain wheat-harvesting village near a river. If he kept talking the story would turn on and on like a wheel, with no end. Thankfully Holo didn't press him to continue.

Was she regretful for asking, or was she happy? To Lawrence it seemed a mixture of both.. perhaps she regretted being happy?

They would travel no further south or west than Gerube. These places weren't meant for the two of them. They could peer at what lay there if they took another step in their direction, but such places would not see the two of them set foot there together.

God had spoken. The world had begun with but a word. If a god could create a world from words, then Holo was surely watching a little past-Lawrence wander around in a world in her own mind right now.

Lawrence could certainly understand why. Having been stuck in fields of wheat for centuries, even an imaginary world would seem familiar. Watching her now, staring off quietly into the distance, he found himself wondering, “will it really be alright to leave her on her own after this?”

He had, after all, read in Tereo village that her home had been completely destroyed. After such a long time it would surely be incredible to see all your friends from the past. But if that wasn't possible..

He couldn't help but worry. He could picture Holo wandering alone under the moon of those mountains. She surely couldn't remain that way forever. Of course, he couldn't admit such worries without incurring her wrath. He had to admit that he would never be able to fill her heart, no matter how hard he tried. She would still remain lonely.

He'd been lying if he said he felt comfortable with this inevitability. But still, he'd accepted it and returned to Holo at the Delink Company. He wanted to comfort her as best he could with his meager abilities. So putting on a cheerful mask, he happily resumed.

“Quite a boring path I've trodden, huh?”

She looked up at him tiredly for a while, then suddenly laughed as if he had something stuck to his face.

“T'is. And yet..”

“And yet..?”

Her back turned to him, she slowly tilted her head in his direction. “Here comes that face full of pride”, he thought.

“Should your hand not be sweaty, I can hold it and tread this boring path by your side.”

She wore a truly evil smile. A smile fit for some unreachable god, high up in the sky. But before his mouth could even open, that smile had melted away into the usual one she wore after having been entertained. Her eyes finally returned to the paper in her hands, and she cried in exclamation.

“Oh!”

She then proudly held the paper high, having completely flushed away the mood they had just shared. Lawrence, being but a normal man, took some time to recover from all that had just happened. Holo kept smiling, patiently waiting for him.

His path was truly not special in any way. It was a peaceful life that Holo was free to share with him, if she wanted to.

“You're right, that's certainly one from D'Jean Company. Looks like an memo of export from last summer.”

“Mmm hmm!”

Lawrence laughed at her proud smile, like she had just found a treasure map. Nothing could change her.

“So exactly sixty crates were shipped. Then we can conclude.. no.. maybe..”

Lawrence immediately turned his thoughts back to that puzzle. If he didn't, he feared he might touch the dream-like bubble that had spread out between the two of them, so he pushed it to the back of his mind. It was too wonderful to pop. He was old enough to understand the meaning of the word “decadence”.

“Well then, search the other papers!”

Holo spoke in an displeased tone, while pulling him out of his thoughts by his ear. He was shocked, and placed his hand on his ear while staring at her unhappy face. When she turned back to the pile of documents he realized that she must have felt left out by his action.. she had wanted to spend time with him.

“Why not ponder over this riddle together?”

He froze after suggesting this, confused by the slight look of anger that crossed her profile. Such a wonderful moment had suddenly spoiled. It defied reason. Holo's mood changed faster than mountain weather.

He couldn't help but wonder if he was just too slow for her. But he chalked it up to the legendarily fickle heart that all teenage girls seemed to share. Of course, he ended that thought by reminding himself that Holo wasn't really a teenager.

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“That does it.”

A while later, Holo finished sorting through her share of the documents. She had found two, and altogether that made seven.

Documents like these were filed by management companies who kept them in neat order. Whoever stole them clearly just grabbed them at random without a care as to their order.

As Lawrence guessed, there were order forms from the previous summer and the winter before it. There was also a shipment manifest for the previous summer. The orders were also for fifty-seven crates, and again sixty were actually shipped.

Since no one ordered already-circulating coins for import, these must have been freshly minted. Those three crates must be there for a reason that the papers didn't specify.

“It appears our search has left us without the discovery of any critical clues.”

“Seems like it. But that's just from the documents mentioning D'Jean Company.. there may be others related..”

“Oh! Shall we-”

“Wait.. this truly may be evidence of the private minting of coins..”

Lawrence wasn't responding to Holo's excitement. He was half-whispering to himself. A large number of extra crates would be easily discovered, but a few at a time should be safe enough to conceal. Or perhaps ordering copper coins first was a prelude to trying gold coins next..

His mind was swelling with such thoughts. Proof of this would require more information.. but

what? Was there another perspective he could approach this from? By the time he came to his senses he realized that Holo was bored.

“...”

She craned her neck, causing her joints to crackle.

“It would appear that you have already lost all interest in chasing that fox?”

Her face was answering her own question: “If so, do not forget about me as well.”

“Shall we consider this riddle, together?”

Holo raised one of her eyebrows and placed her elbows on her knees, cupping her chin in her hands.

“If this leads you to a huge profit.”

“Well, you don't like me thinking about business on my own, and aren't against thinking in general, are you? This should help pass the time.”

Upon saying this, Holo's eyes opened so wide it took him by surprise. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again. Her eyes closed, and she turned to the pile of paper, holding her hood down as if to hide her face.

“What's wrong?”

Her tail beat against the side of the boat, and her ears against her hood. And when her hands finally released that hood, the eyes that stared at him were full of anger. Even Lawrence was afraid of being on the receiving end of that stare.

“Why.. why are you so angry?”

Her eyes of amber were now red as molten iron.

“Angry? Angry, you say?!”

He felt like he had stepped on his own tail. The moment that thought came to his mind, the power in her body seemed to drain away entirely.. like a over-full bag that had just burst. She

looked so pallid he was worried she might fade away like a ghost, while staring at him with those blood red eyes.

“That is just like you. Never understanding.”

She then fell silent after sighing in an exaggerated manner. He felt like an apprentice that had angered their master so much they had even lost their ability to be angry. His mind raced. She was bored, and wanted to be with someone.. that's what she told him.

He didn't think out loud for fear of her growing angrier still. What had she heard in his words that made her bare her fangs at him?

Think carefully before you speak.

In his apprentice days, Lawrence had hated hearing that phrase the most. Because it usually came right after he had been smacked upside the head, having opening his mouth to not earn a kick from staying silent. But if he didn't know what she was mad about, he could only remain silent.

“You truly do not understand, do you?”

She echoed her own words from the past. He was frozen in place, but his eyes turned away.

“Fine then.”

That snapped him back to reality, and he turned to look at her. She then spoke with clear sincerity.

“I shall speak with you no more, until you have solved this riddle on your own.”

“Why-”

He couldn't bring himself to finish saying “-are you being so childish?”

Holo stopped leaning her body against his and moved away from him, dragging their blanket along with her.

There was no other word for it – he was stunned. Was she joking? Lawrence would have asked, but didn't because he knew she was ignoring him. She was stubborn as a child, and if she told

him she wouldn't talk to him, she meant it.

She must have thought it was fine to ignore him outright – a typical Holo strategy. Arguing over it would be even more childish, and ignoring her in return would only weaken his position. And most importantly, if he did nothing he had no chance of winning.

He shifted his gaze back at the pile of documents. He found this sort of thing interesting, but Holo obviously didn't. She was happy to look over them with him, even if she'd rather not. But the reason for her anger just wasn't coming to him.

Lawrence would have been happy if they just spoke about nothing instead of thinking seriously.. there were often clever grains of wisdom in their games. Was she perhaps worried they might get involved in something bad again because of him? He just couldn't figure it out..

He put away the documents from the D'Jean Company, deciding to give it up. Holo still looked away from him. A merchant was used to trying to please others, but it was especially difficult to please her. Her thoughts seemed alien to him. She had given him a hint, and he had no choice but to follow her instructions. Harsher punishments lay ahead for him if he dared to try cheating.

While he was contemplating, Holo raised her head. She wasn't next to him, but the boat wasn't so large that he couldn't tell. He looked in the direction she did, further downstream. Had she noticed something about the boats in front of them?

In the next moment he heard a rumbling. He realized it was hooves. A horse was racing in their direction along the riverbank.

“What's going on?”

He instinctively whispered this to Holo, but heard no reply. She truly had decided to ignore him outright, even when he was reacting reflexively. He wished it would seem to her like he was whispering to himself, but knew that was impossible. A momentary pang of loneliness struck him, nudging him to solve the problem before things got any worse.

Holo emerged from the blanket and carefully stepped out onto the pier, as if Lawrence wasn't even there.

The horse gradually slowed down as it approached them, and a man leaped off before it had even come to a full stop. He wore a cloak, but his sleeves were rolled up.. clearly another

boatman. Lacoza and his peers seemed to know him. They asked what was amiss, and he began explaining after a brief greeting.

Cole stayed away from the discussion, as though trying not to disturb them. He stepped away, back to the pier, though he seemed keen on knowing what was going on. Lawrence wouldn't have been able to resist approaching them for a listen.. the boy had excellent discipline.

Holo walked up to Cole and spoke into his ear. She might be asking the same thing Lawrence had just asked her, but Lawrence couldn't tell. But Cole seemed surprised at her words, looking up at her, then peeking at Lawrence. So she must have been speaking about Lawrence.. probably not kind words either. Cole nodded as she continued. Not once did she so much as glance in his direction.

He was no longer worried about whether she'd disappear on him. Instead, he had a sinking feeling that she had him completely figured out.

“Right. Oiiii, teacher-man!”

The mariners had finished their discussion, and Lacoza was shouting back at Lawrence. He rose to his feet, and walked up to the bridge. Holo stood beside Cole, holding his hand. Lawrence felt that was still better than if it were Amati.. these two looked more like siblings.

“What's going on?”

“Sorry, it looks like I'm gonna have to ask you to do some walking.”

“Walking?”

The man on horseback resumed his mission upstream. He carried a flag dyed in blue. Lawrence could guess that meant something happened in the river.

“Look's like a big ship's been sunk. The whole river's blocked. They were greedy, and got reckless. By the time anyone noticed the ship it was too late – boat after boat got stuck there. There's a rumor some boat got sunk, but no boatman was aboard. Things might get complicated.”

“That's..”

It sounded like how hungry mercenaries would attack a merchant ship during a war. In flat

plains like these, a river was too shallow and slow-moving for something like that.. it was crazy. Someone must have done it on purpose, faking an accident and sinking a boat to stop everyone. Doing this during a time of peace would earn the wrath of the lord in the area.

But Lawrence knew someone who wouldn't care about that sort of scorn in the slightest. If he wore a hat, he would have taken it off and saluted Eve. He'd might even cheer her on.

“And what's the situation like now?”

They still needed to know how to make it to Gerube; they were only halfway. But it was too far to stop now and head back to Lenos. Horses would be the logical choice, but all the horses around here would be hauling goods, and no one would rent them out for long-distance riding.

“We hear it wasn't mercenaries, so things'll probably be cleared up pretty quick. But the boats that got stuck there are all too full of goods to help anyone out. And there's folks on that grounded ship who aren't brave enough to jump into the freezing water and swim ashore, so I've a duty to go help 'em out. All I can say is I'm sorry, and hope you won't mind walking there while I go on ahead with a lighter load.”

A boatman's reputation could only suffer if they asked paying passengers to walk after welcoming them aboard. Even if it wasn't their own fault. As a proper boatman, Lacoza was clearly dejected.

“I'm a merchant, and since walking means saving money, you'll get nothing but smiles from me.”

There wasn't any real kinship between their professions, but Lacoza gave a strained smile as if to say “it's my loss” before shaking hands with Lawrence. The problem was Holo. But Lawrence didn't even have to even turn to her, because Lacoza continued talking.

“But, on a cold day like this it'd be beyond shameful to ask a girl to walk around unprepared. And all those believers are sure to be nervous with the river being blocked.. it'd sure raise their spirits to see one so like a goddess pay them a visit by boat.”

Hearing him soften the blow like that made Lawrence feel more at ease. It would have been a headache to try to breach the topic with Holo, given how intently she was ignoring him. And this would spare her a lot of complaining for having to walk.

“Well, I'd better offload these goods of mine.”

“Let me lend you a hand.”

“Hey now.. one might say that I asked you to help!”

He had a way with words. There was no way Lawrence could have said no.

“I just need to take the wheat and beans down. The other crates have to stay aboard.”

“Alright, then let's get moving.”

They turned their backs to the cargo on the boat before Lacoza gave a small cry as if remembering something.

“Oh yes.. I overheard a bit of that happy little conversation of yours..”

Lawrence felt a wave of embarrassment washing over him.

“It's okay, I didn't hear nothing worth getting embarrassed over.”

Lacoza gave a sly smile, and Lawrence could only smile shyly in return.

“Just that I heard you mention Ainee coins.”

“Ainee coins, sure?”

“Yeah.. bet you'll never guess what it turns out I'm haulin'.”

Lawrence had already suspected Lacoza was hauling coins, but this was quite a coincidence. Was Lacoza just messing with him? He thought it over for a second, but he had to admit that it made sense. Gold or silver coins would be under armed guard, and other passengers like them wouldn't be allowed aboard.

That, and Lacoza's boat could hold at most maybe ten crates. That meant there were four other boats carrying copper coins. Having already decided on their cargo, they wouldn't be able to get involved in the fur dispute. That's why they were taking their time in Lenos and why Lawrence and Holo had a chance to hop aboard. It added up.

It also meant that Lacoza should have some useful information. As Lawrence's eyes sharpened

into his merchant's stare, Lacoza met them as if he was waiting. Lacoza wordlessly communicated to Lawrence to help him unload his crates first. He then repeated the gesture to Cole and Holo, before placing his hand on Lawrence's shoulder and pulling his face in closer.

“I share your interest. For two years I've been one of those who're shipping a certain number of crates of coins at certain times. Like you said, the total's always fifty-seven boxes. I never really cared about the number 'till now, but over time everyone's figured out it's always fifty-seven.”

Holo gave Cole some food, water, spirits, and a robe to change into. It was a fine robe Lawrence had purchased, and the boy was too surprised to accept it. But Holo just put it on him anyway. His clothes were just too shabby.

It seemed possible he'd never worn a robe like that before. He seemed afraid to walk in it, but didn't seem entirely bothered by it either.

“Fifty-seven were ordered, but sixty was the total minted by D'Jean Company. That's three missing crates someone must be moving in secret, or D'Jean's have some sort of shady deal going on.”

Lacoza jumped back aboard the ship and lifted a bag of wheat. He handed it to Lawrence, who placed it on the pier. Cole was watching them as he lifted up a bag of beans. He might just be eager, but it was more likely he was keen to know what Lawrence and Lacoza were discussing.

“I thank the company, and trust the others hauling the coins, but God forgive me if I've been unwittingly involved in some crime.”

Lacoza wasn't Cole, but cheating and being cheated were so frequent in their time that they could even be considered the norm.

“Of course it'd be best to take this up with D'Jean's, but shipping fees are so expensive.. and if it turns out that it *is* a darker secret of D'Jean's then it would be unwise to ask.”

Contract workers always had to worry about such things.

As Lawrence received the last sack of wheat and placed it on the pier, he spoke.

“Of course I've no interest in exposing any of this. I'm happy with any castle, even one made of sand.”

“You traveling merchants and your dry humor. But it feels uncomfortable to know I might've been used to commit crimes.”

Lacoza smiled as he spoke. Mariners like him had to work the same river their entire lives, so it was important to them to keep the owners of their cargo happy. But if those same owners were using them for criminal activity, it was the boatmen who'd get thrown underwater.

Boatmen obviously wanted to know the truth, but they lived in a small world where they could never talk about it. A traveler from another land, on the other hand..

That shouldn't be far from what Lacoza meant, thought Lawrence, even if he might be overthinking things a little.

Cole accepted luggage from Holo and placed it upon his back without complaint. He noticed Lawrence was looking at him, and looked right back. Lawrence waved to him to start walking ahead.

“Then I'll leave my companion in your care. Just take care to not deify her too much.”

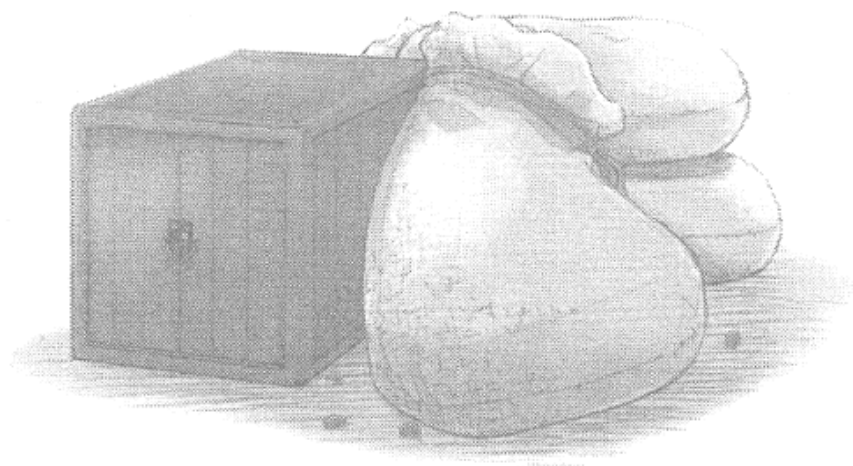
“Hahaha! Havin' too many people praise her would be far too tirin'. And don't worry, you'll not be walkin' that far. We'll meet 'fore sunset.”

Lawrence nodded and turned his head slightly so he could get a peek at Holo. She lay there in the blanket. As he observed her sleeping form, he wistfully spoke to himself.

“There sure are lots of reasons to quarrel.”

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Chapter 4

It was awful walking along the riverbank. But despite traveling by horse-drawn cart for a long time, Lawrence didn't find himself growing tired. However, he found Cole's pace difficult to keep up with.. how could those little legs move so quickly?

When he was younger Lawrence admired merchants who traveled by horse and cart. They inspired him to walk twice as quickly to get to that stage himself. He found himself nostalgic thinking about those days.

“There's no reason to run there.”

“Right.”

Lawrence had carelessly blurted out his words half-sarcastically, but Cole simply heard him and obeyed.

Lacoza's boat was now light enough to float well ahead of them. It soon disappeared, taking Holo with it. The other boats, being too large to risk going ahead, had remained at the bridge. The river was now incredibly calm.

The water's surface glistened like the trail left behind a slug. It was a strangely amusing thing to consider. Lawrence might even compare it to a pane of glass lying on the ground.. but perhaps that was going too far.

Just then a fish jumped out of the water, shattering the glassy illusion.

“Um.. master?”

It seemed the little fish to his other side was also splashing.

“About the Ainee coins..”

“Are you going to ask if there's any profit to be had?”

Lawrence was probably too used to being with Holo – his attitude was a lot like hers. Cole winced slightly, but nodded. The boy seemed ashamed of wanting to earn money. Lawrence stared ahead of them and breathed in.

“Likely not.”

“Is.. that so?”

Wearing Holo's robes made Cole resemble her quite a bit, even if he seemed dejected. Lawrence was surprised to find himself reaching his hand out to the boy, as was Cole. But he still let Lawrence rub the top of his head.

“You know, money really shouldn't be an issue for you.”

As Lawrence removed his hand he noticed the boy's head didn't feel much different from Holo's.. other than the ears. Perhaps he only looked different in the robes because he wasn't hiding a tail underneath.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. The clever wandering students I've seen had a surprising number of possessions. They seemed well off enough to get drunk every night.”

He was exaggerating a bit, but there were students wealthy enough to afford taking ten classes with different teachers. Cole hadn't thought he could afford even one, so he was swindled by the book scheme.

“Ah, yeah.. there are.”

“Have you stopped to consider how they get that money?”

“I think they rob others.”

To him, having seen other students with such unimaginable fortune must have made him conclude they were resorting to crime. He had concluded that they must be resorting to means vastly different than he was willing to use. He wasn't winning any points with Lawrence this time.

“They may not have done all that differently from you.”

“What?”

The boy stared at him, clearly wondering how that was possible. Lawrence was wearing the same expression he'd use after cleverly countering Holo.. she wasn't here, so he was acting a bit proud. When he realized this, he chuckled at himself and scratched his face.

“Well if you're wondering how they could be so much better off, the answer is simply hard work.”

“Hard work..”

“Indeed. To get this far, you probably had to ask people if you could stay in their homes and get free food, right?”

“Yes.”

“You're face is saying 'But I worked really hard, didn't I?'”

Cole winced and stared at the ground. He wasn't happy.

“You worked hard to get this far, by asking people for handouts. A bowl of porridge was enough to keep you warm for a while, right?”

Cole's eyes darted back and forth, then he nodded.

“But other students wouldn't stop there. They're driven to do more. The stories I've heard are inspiring.. even a merchant like me can appreciate their determination.”

Cole stayed silent for a while, but Lawrence left him alone.. he was sharp enough to want to figure it out for himself.

“So what did they do?”

It was sometimes difficult for a confident and clever person to have to ask for an answer. Of course, others felt it was faster to just ask right away.. but Cole's eyes were nothing like theirs.

Lawrence didn't answer him immediately. First he pulled a bottle of spirits from the pack Cole was carrying and took a swig of it's distilled vintage. He jokingly offered the bottle to Cole, who refused it. Lawrence could sense the boy was being wary – he'd likely experienced the pain of eating an unknown food or drinking an unknown drink.

“Well, think of it this way. Let's say someone gave you a herring.”

Cole nodded.

“And it was so thin it seemed there would be no meat on it after you skinned it.. all that would be left would be it's smoky smell. What would you do?”

“Huh?”

Lawrence wasn't being metaphorical; Cole had likely been in this exact situation. The boy answered instantly.

“I'd eat half, and save the other half.”

“For the next day?”

“Yeah.”

How had he survived all this time? Lawrence's appreciation of the boy was growing.

“You wouldn't try going somewhere else to get, say, some soup?”

“You mean going to more houses?”

His eyes clearly showed his disdain. Lawrence was really enjoying himself.

“There's a reason you wouldn't, right?”

Cole nodded. He wasn't so stupid as to do unnecessary things.

“I feel lucky enough having even found one thing to eat.”

“Of course. Kind people aren't everywhere.”

“...”

Cole had taken the bait. If it were Holo, she would have pretended to do so as well.. only to tie the fishing line to the bottom of the pool and watch the fisherman pull himself into the water. But with this fish, Lawrence didn't have to worry so much.

“Business is smoother when you have more money at your disposal.. it's like a tool. But if you always fight with your bare hands instead, you'll always end up hurt.”

Cole's eyes seemed to finally see. He was revitalized, his brain switched on.

“So I should use the herring instead?”

His lips curved upward, excitement written all over his face. Happiness could even exist in this form.

“Yes. You should take it with you when you go to the next house.”

“Eh?”

Cole's surprise was only natural. He already had food – how could that help convince someone to give him even more? But it wasn't just possible.. it was even easier than catching that first fish.

“You hold the herring – or better yet, have a younger friend hold it - and knock on the door. Is anyone home? Might a kind believer in God be willing to help out? You see, I have but this one fish to eat, but it's my young friend's birthday, so I would dearly like to make a pie of it. Will you please spare some money for the sake of this young lamb? Enough just to make a pie, please.. please..”

Begging was a basic business skill. Lawrence's act was so convincing that Cole swallowed while watching him.

“After hearing something like that no one could reject you. But there was a crucial bit there - you ask for money, not to help make the pie. No one will invite you in and start a fire just to make you a pie. But they'll be willing to give you a little money.”

“I see.. so I can get as much as I want..”

“Indeed. With one fish you can earn over and over again. People will think that just one fish surely can't be enough, so they will offer you more. After wandering around town this way you'll end up with quite a lot.”

Cole was so dazed that if Lawrence just put a sign next to him with the word “confused” written on it, people would toss their change to him right then and there. He seemed dizzy, as though

the sky and ground had suddenly switched places. There were clever people out there who thought in such ways he'd never imagined.

“Since it's not quite on the same level as asking someone to 'sacrifice a soldier to save the castle', people will have the attitude that it would be nice to help you. They'll feel better about themselves for being kind to you, so in a way they'll even be compensated. And this way you'll get enough for yourself *and* your friend. How about that? Are you learning now?”

Holo's sleeping face was charming because she wasn't wearing her mask of defense. It was entirely different from her normal, wolf-like waking state. When Cole looked so dejected and defenseless, he was quite charming as well.. though not as charming as Holo.

“Not knowing is a sin.”

Lawrence knocked the back of Cole's head. The boy sighed and nodded.

“The one you understand the least.. is yourself. I remember hearing that.”

“Well, there's certainly truth to that, but more importantly-”

As Lawrence spoke there came the sound of horse's hooves. They were probably riders from the boats stopped behind them. Lawrence wasn't sure if it would be more accurate to call them flying balls of hair with people clinging to them. He counted one, two, three.. seven riders in total.

Did they anticipate some sort of profit? Even if they were aware of some secret it would be difficult to squeeze a profit from such a situation. More importantly-

“More importantly, one needs to consider what they *weren't* taught by others. When we say 'not knowing is a sin', we're talking about wisdom, not knowledge.”

Cole's eyes opened wide and he gritted his teeth. He tightened his grip on the luggage he carried, to the point where his fists began to pale. He then raised his head to thank Lawrence.

“...thank you for the lesson.”

Damn.. so gods *did* always win.

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Traveling with Cole turned out to be enjoyable. Lawrence kept trying to hint to Cole that he wanted to know what Holo said to him earlier. But he didn't ask him directly, because Holo had put her robe on the boy as if to purposely mark him with her angry scent.

“Uh, no problem. Hmm.. it looks like this boat disturbance really has displaced a lot of people.”

They had no trouble seeing the view ahead of them from the steep riverside path. They would need some time to reach their destination, but it was already in sight.

As Lacoza mentioned, a large ship was blocking the river, with many boats stuck behind it. The boat on the riverbank was probably Lacoza himself. Several people on horseback were there as well - probably messengers of the nobility in the area – who would likely be gathering news.

It looked as though some people were moving around, but it was unclear what they were up to. Cole spoke with a distant tone.

“It's almost like.. a celebration..”

Lawrence looked at Cole's face, wondering if the boy was feeling lonely and nostalgic for his home. Lawrence had left his own cold village because he couldn't take it's bleak atmosphere. But at times even he would find himself missing his hometown. Cole's eyes weren't just tinted red by the setting sun. Lawrence felt compelled to ask.

“So where are you from?”

“Huh?”

“It's fine if you'd rather not say.”

When he was asked this question, Lawrence had a habit of saying the name of the city nearest his hometown.. it helped raise his esteem. But in all honesty, it wouldn't matter if he said the correct name, because no one would know of such a small village anyway.

“Uhh.. a place called Pinot.”

Cole seemed to answer with fear. But Lawrence had truly never heard of the place.

“Sorry, I'm not familiar with it.. which direction is it in? Eastward?”

Judging from it's name, Lawrence guessed it lay to the south and east.. a land of limestone and warm seawater. Of course, he was basing that on rumors.

“No, to the north.. actually not that far from here.”

“Really?”

Someone interested in the Church who had traveled north was more likely to be a migrant from the south. Many had sold everything they had to move northward and start a new life. But many of them were unable to adapt to the new land.

“Have you heard of the source of the Roam river, the mountains of Roef?”

Lawrence nodded.

“It's just upstream from there, in the foothills. The winters were cold, but the falling snow was so beautiful..”

Lawrence was surprised. Back in Lenos, they had found Holo's story written a book they had borrowed from Rigolo. And apparently, Holo had come from the Roef mountains.

People who had migrated to the north didn't usually refer to themselves as being from the south anymore. And Roef was a huge area.. many people lived in it's valleys and basins.

“It's about half a month away from here. I came back north for a job.. but if I couldn't find one I guess I'd just have to go back home.”

Lawrence didn't have the heart to laugh at Cole for saying this, especially with the look of embarrassment on his face. It took a great deal of courage and determination to leave one's village. And it didn't matter if he left ignoring the wishes of his parents or if they encouraged him.. returning home without achieving his goal would be difficult.. as difficult as it was to fight the desire to go back home.

“Did people move there?”

“Move?”

“Did the villagers migrate there from the south?”

Cole paused, then shook his head.

“No.. but I heard once that the village was from a place that sank to the bottom of a lake because the land collapsed..”

“No no.. what I'm ultimately getting at is that no one in the north usually wants to learn Church Law.”

Cole blinked upon hearing that and spoke.

“Master Lient told me that it's best for someone like me, born in a place with a different religion, to accept the Churches' teachings as soon as possible.”

Cole was wearing a smile of self-mockery.. Lawrence wondered why.

“Hmm.. maybe. Did missionaries come to your village?”

Some missionaries were peaceful and friendly, and seemed to follow the teachings of their God. But most of them hid behind the name of the Pope to kill people and violently force villages to convert to their religion. But if Cole's village had met that fate, he'd probably hate the Church and not want to learn their Law.

“No, none of them came to us.”

Cole stared off into the distance after saying this. He wore an expression older than one would expect for his age.

“They came to a village two hills away. The people of that village were skilled owl and fox trappers. It was a place even smaller place than Pinot. One day someone from the South came there and set up a Church.”

Lawrence hoped Cole wouldn't continue by saying he then started to believe the teachings of the Church.

Villages in this situation would hear about the conversion of their neighbors, and hope they wouldn't be next. The reason was obvious.

“But every village believes in their own gods.. the pagans would be..”

Cole reacted with surprise at Lawrence's words, and stared at him quietly. That confirmed Lawrence's suspicions.

“I'm actually someone who could be counted an enemy of the Church.. you can tell me your story if you'd like?”

Hearing Lawrence say this, Cole's surprise seemed stuck to his face. It was as if he wanted to speak his mind but couldn't put his thoughts into words. He closed his mouth for a time. Then with questioning eyes, he probed Lawrence.

“Truly?”

Obviously Cole was not used to suspecting others. Such a naïve person surely must have lead a tough life.. but it made the boy endearing.

“I'll use God's name in vain, if you'd like?”

Cole's smile after hearing Lawrence respond was so charming that Lawrence couldn't help but pat him on the head.

“I heard that two hundred and twenty years ago, the heads of our village met together for several days. They thought about what we should do.. obey the Church or fight back? From what I hear, the Church never bothers talking.. there's always news about them killing people. But in that winter, some powerful person in the Church fell ill, so we were saved. Of course if we had to fight we should win.. we know the land better, and had more people.”

If that was true they would have fought back as soon as someone was killed. They must have understood that eventually more people from the Church would try again. Even a remote village in the hills was still connected to the world around them.

“But I had my doubts where I heard that.”

Lawrence could tell where Cole was going with this. The boy was clever. Not being limited by any religious belief, he had chosen the correct way to protect his village. He could stop all the uncertainty and fighting by wearing the robes of an important Church official. It was a funny system of power, and if he learned about it's Laws he could become part of that system. He could protect his village.

“You don't regret your choice?”

Even Holo would show weakness when her home was mentioned. Lawrence pulled the edge of Cole's hood down to dry the tears the boy was trying to cover with his eyes.

“Only the village head and my great grandmother agreed.”

“Really? They must have believed that if it was you, that you'd make it.”

Cole nodded and paused. He dried his tears on the shoulders of his robe and resumed walking.

“They quietly gave me some money, so I headed out to go to school.”

That explained his motivation for trying to find the money to carry on with his studies. It was always the ones who fought for others that had the inner strength to do such things.

However, Lawrence wasn't the kind of rich merchant who could sponsor the boy's studies. He could only help him so much, perhaps to show him how to earn pocket money or to avoid traps, or even just liven up his travels a little.

“Though I can't offer you any money right now..”

“Oh, no, I-”

“This copper coin problem might net you some reward.. if you come up with an answer to the riddle that pleases our good captain Lacoza.”

Lawrence said *an* answer, not *the* answer, because *the* answer would only be learned by asking the D'Jean Company. That wasn't going to happen, but they could at least deduce something clever. It was reasonable to expect some kind of reward for that.. even someone who pulled a thorn from another's finger deserved some gratitude.

“Well, I say that, but it'll be worthwhile even if it just helps us relax on this trip.”

Lawrence smiled and playfully knocked Cole on the head. Holo was always laughing at how high-strung Lawrence was, but compared to Cole he was positively laid back.

“I take it that celebration you mentioned earlier is one from Pinot? That's how it looks?”

He pointed at the sunken ship, which could now be more accurately described as several hills of broken parts. Despite several people drying their clothes by a fire on the riverbank, the actual highlight of the scene was watching men hauling the broken ship ashore by pulling ropes.

Those men wore different clothes and were varied in age.. the only thing they seemed to share in common was how unlucky they were to have to pull the boat against the current. Cleverer people might have taken their luggage and walked downstream, but it seemed most of them had left their luggage aboard and were now fiercely pulling the ropes.

It was such a spectacle that it had even attracted long-cloaked knights on horseback. Others were holding their own boats steady to keep them from capsizing or drifting away, and were cheering at the rope-pullers in support. Cole seemed entranced by the scene for a while, before finally turning to Lawrence and speaking.

“This is livelier.”

Seeing the boy's expression, Lawrence barely managed to swallow the words that sprang to mind. Cole wasn't Holo, but if Lawrence had to find an apprentice, then Cole would be at the top of his list. It would be difficult to find a better candidate.

Moreover, once his travels with Holo ended, all that would be left would be the cold reality of traveling alone. Even if he could never hope to match Holo, Cole was still a worthy companion to share the bench seat on Lawrence's wagon.

But the boy had his own goals and aspirations, and they weren't selfish ones. Lawrence had to forcefully resist the great temptation to ask if he wanted to be his apprentice. After all, Cole had no interest in being a merchant.. a fact that made Lawrence want to cry out to the heavens.

“We should probably ask to join them. Helping pull those ropes should also help us warm up.”

“Definitely.”

Lawrence and Cole had finally arrived. Lacoza raised his oar to greet them from the fastest and lightest boat on the river.

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The scene was quite different when viewed close up. The ground was very muddy; so muddy

that one's boots could easily get trapped if they stepped down too hard. Not to mention that pulling the ropes with one's bare hands in the dry winter air was an easy way to injure them.

But worst of all, those ropes had been tied to a weak part of the vessel. Just then, they pulled with all their might and the part snapped off, causing them all to lose their balance. They fell to the ground and were covered in mud.

The merchants and businessmen led by Lawrence were working hard. But the moment they started growing tired they lost all of their enthusiasm. Keeping up morale was a challenge as they were only pulling out broken pieces of a ship.. nothing heroic.

Given the cold weather, the faces of the boatmen who had been responsible for tying the ropes had become pale, and their lips a pale green. A fire had been set on the riverbank, but the traveling female artists and tailors had also jumped into the river at Holo's urging.

Of course, owing to the freezing water, everyone pulling the ropes was in pain. Some of the older boatmen felt terrible about the situation, and asked their peers to let the people stop. But they were being stubborn, so there was tension in the air.

Everyone seemed melancholy. There was an attitude that things weren't going to work out among the merchants near Lawrence. Once there wasn't any profit to be had, they lost their composure.. yet another characteristic trait among merchants.

The boatmen had willfully asked the others to help them pull the ship out to save their reputations, but people were abandoning the ropes one after the other. They probably felt it couldn't be done. The younger boatmen needed to give up the effort before it damaged their reputations even further. They were in between Lenos and Gerube, and the sun was setting. If they continued their effort, it would reflect poorly on the boatmen. So after a while the rope-pulling operation was halted.

Lawrence's lifestyle wasn't unhealthy, but he rarely had to physically exert himself like this. He felt like his body was made of lead. His palms were on fire. The left side of his face had swollen; he wasn't sure if it was from the cold or not, but it wasn't painful.

“You okay?”

Lawrence checked up on Cole, who had stopped pulling the ropes quite early. He had given it his all right from the start, as though it really was a celebration. But his body was frail, and his

stamina drained from him quickly. He could only watch from the sidelines.

“Ah, yes.. I'm sorry.”

“It's alright.. judging by their faces these other merchants think you made the right choice to stop when you did.”

Lawrence pointed his chin at the merchants as he spoke; they were sitting on the ground in groups of three to five, carefully counting the profits they had lost. They were obviously upset that they had paid more than they earned back. Some of them were venting their frustrations loudly on the boatmen.. probably the ones who were hauling fur.

“How do you intend to compensate us for our losses?!”

If Lawrence was transporting goods he'd feel the same way. He didn't have the heart to stop them, despite the innocence of the boatmen. Those who had been on the sunken ship felt especially terrible. It was thrice the size of Lacoza's boat, and fur had been stuffed onto it. Even if they were extra-careful, the slightest mistake would have been enough to sink them.

Everyone present was an easy target. Just a casual glance around showed how uncomfortable everyone was. They could be afraid of being attacked.. but no one could blame them given the tense atmosphere.

When trading, the order in which ships arrived was the order in which they would profit the most - especially in cities that larger ships could travel to. If everyone was hauling the same cargo, it could happen that only the first two ships to arrive would earn enough to profit.

Given how unusual it was for a boat to be sunk, Eve was probably the one who planned this accident. It would be a surefire way to secure profits while causing the most problems for her competition. Only God knew how many of them weren't on the verge of madness; it was certainly understandable that they would be venting their anger now.

“What will happen now?”

Cole asked his question while handing a waterskin to Lawrence. Of course, he had no reason to rush to Gerube, so he was just hunting for something to talk about.

“The river has many masters who take care of these things. By tomorrow morning they'll have sent out their horses and men. With horses, hauling the ship shouldn't take long.”

“I see..”

Cole was probably imagining this scene with horses hauling the ship ashore. Lawrence stared at the prow of the ship, pointing upward as though ready to take off and fly. As he drank some of the water in the skin, he heard the sound of footsteps. Thinking it was Holo, he turned around to discover that it was only Lacoza.

“Ah.. sorry to make you walk.”

Lacoza waved his hand gently. Lawrence noticed that his thick hands were also swollen red. He must have worked hard to bring people and goods ashore among the crowd of boats on the river. It would have taken a great deal more energy than usual for him to fight the current back and forth like that.. he must be exhausted.

“It's alright, I don't take issue with walking along the river.”

“Hahaha, I'll just take your word for it.”

Lacoza could barely smile. He scratched his hand and walked back to the river.

“This is really a bad stroke of luck.. though it oughtta be sorted out by tomorrow.”

“Did it really happen because of the fur situation? I mean, sinking that boat.”

Others would also be wondering the same thing. Lacoza nodded at Lawrence's question, but Cole seemed too tired to follow along. Lacoza pushed the boy's head roughly before properly answering.

“Seems so. But whoever caused it's pretty damn reckless. They've gotta be ready to pay the piper. It'll be death for them, broken by wheel.. pretty horrible way to go.”

Being tightly bound to a huge wheel, viciously bludgeoned, then left on a hilltop for the birds.. it truly was one of the most horrible ways to die. Did Eve have the confidence to escape such a fate? Lawrence felt no hatred toward her; he hoped she could get her profits in time.

”So what are you gonna do?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you walk that way, there's a hostel next to the gate.. though I can't say it's a nice place for a woman to spend the night.”

Lacoza spoke before glancing over at Holo. She was happily talking with a tall traveling artist.

“Seems the owner of the sunken ship went to the next bridge to talk trade with a food merchant.. so we should have food and wine at least. But you'll wind up spending the night here if you wait for 'em to strike a deal.”

Lawrence finally understood why he hadn't seen the owner of that ship yet.

“The places one sleeps while on a journey should have no roof.. and not wobble about. So here sounds about right for us.”

Lacoza distorted his face at Lawrence's response like he was dazzled. He shrugged in an exaggerated manner and sighed.

“It's good at least that everyone here's a merchant.. if there were mercenaries things would be really ugly.”

“Quite a few of them *were* getting pretty ugly..”

“Haha, just shouting ugly words is fine.. Mercenaries would be shouting with their sabers.”

For Lacoza to say that with a serious tone was creepy. Cole shuddered like he had just swallowed an apple seed.

“But whoever sank the boat's a nasty piece of work. I hope Count Bolger gets 'im.”

Lawrence might be cheering Eve on in his heart, but Lacoza's anger was understandable. In order to not expose his thoughts, Lawrence changed the subject.

“Mr. Lacoza, you had goods to haul as quickly as possible, right?”

Just how many days did Lawrence have left with Holo?

Merchants were good at calculating profit and loss.. very, very good at it. But the sad fact was that Lawrence had no idea what Holo was so angry about. Yet Lacoza, who was twice his age,

might be able to help him figure it out easily.

The problem was bringing it up casually. Lawrence had worked incredibly hard to be able to speak comfortably and naturally around Holo.. but he just didn't have the nerve to ask someone such a personal question calmly and naturally.

“Hey, trust me, it's fine to take our time. You guys don't really mind either, right?”

Lacoza answered and placed his arm, which seemed strong enough to knock Lawrence out in one punch, on his shoulders. They were trying to keep Cole from listening but the boy remained close, trying to hear as much as he could.

“I've naught but confidence that I can handle this kind of problem. You know why?”

Lawrence shook his head. Lacoza removed his arm and stood up tall.

“I've been on a river for over 20 years.. if you have problems to flush away in a river, that's my specialty.”

Holo's laughter was audible despite her being far away. She was clearly eavesdropping, but seemed to be in a good mood. At least he wasn't the only one who wanted to solve this problem.

Lawrence wasn't sure he could trust Lacoza with *this* problem, but it might be a good idea to go for it. After all, it was obvious to others that Lawrence and Holo shared some sort of relationship.

“Then, you don't mind me sharing my own problem?”

“Just leave it to me.”

Both Cole and Lacoza drew closer. He had only met them today. They were all different ages and occupations, but it curiously felt like they were all old friends.

Surely before meeting Holo, this sort of thing would be impossible for him. He was starting to wonder if he might be able to live this way after he parted ways with her.

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“Does anyone have any ruined cloth or things we can use as fuel?”

Someone shouted out, and a surprisingly large number of people responded. Bits were piled up on the riverbank and preparations were made for a celebration. Even the food and wine merchant was joining in the festivities, having sold enough to be able to accept the invitation of the sunken ship's owner.

At the start there were still a number of fur merchants angry with the owner of the sunken ship, but things had gradually settled down. This sort of event was a good way to let everyone vent their frustrations. After the fighting had stopped, everyone smiled and enjoyed the food and wine. Since there was nothing that people could do to solve the problem now, they might as well have fun.

But while enemies were shaking hands, everyone had left Lawrence and his friends. Lawrence had just finished explaining why Holo was angry to them while they silently listened. Then, Lacoza started to talk in an uneasy tone.. but he spoke to Cole.



“Hey, you'd better not grow up like him!”

Cole seemed worried for Lawrence's sake. But Lacoza continued.

“You understand, don't you?”

Cole hesitated for a moment, but nodded. So they did agree that it was Lawrence's fault that Holo was angry. But then Lacoza grabbed the boy with his powerful arms. He only spoke a few words before leaving and pulling the boy along with him.

“The river flows.. but why?”

A riddle? Cole didn't understand, and tilted his head. Lacoza whispered an explanation into the boy's ear, and he again nodded. So they had figured out why Holo was angry. And the answer seemed like it was obvious.. but the two of them were going to leave Lawrence high and dry to figure it out on his own.

Lawrence felt like a laborer who wasn't able to complete the job his employer had given him. He stood there, dumbfounded. Watching the two of them speak with Holo only intensified that feeling. The three of them were happily discussing something, and odds were that it was him. No, judging by how Holo continued to avoid looking at him, and how they were continuing to look at him, they *must* be talking about him.

Holo freed Cole from Lacoza's grip, knocked him on the head, then hugged his waist. Cole rolled his eyes in an obvious manner. And then, finally, Holo quickly peeped at Lawrence and spoke. But Lawrence could only turn away in response to her provocation.

“Lonely, are you not?”

But Lawrence didn't feel too bad about it. Even if it wasn't just Holo laughing at him, but Lacoza and Cole as well. Before he met Holo, Lawrence had believed a merchant's fame was something difficult to repair once destroyed. That's why he would always stand tall, bluffing, over-reaching, and never trusting anyone. But now he understood – he was the same way Cole was when they met.

When Lawrence had suggested he buy Cole's documents, the boy stared him down in an attempt to raise the price. It didn't help, and actually made him appear old-fashioned and uneducated. But Lawrence realized that he was trapped in his own limited knowledge and thinking. He played with Cole just as Holo played with him.

He put his hand to his forehead in thought, asking himself if someone could be a good merchant while remaining independent? He must still be a rookie in Holo's eyes, thinking in such small terms. He smiled at the notion.

Lawrence was eccentric enough to sometimes feel it would be a good thing if horses could talk. Yet he never understood how easy it was to get closer to people. Just like how Holo and Lacoza treated Cole, the people he had met had barely smiled at him. But still-

“Realizing this still doesn't help me understand her anger.”

He sighed after speaking to himself.

Lacoza and Cole left Holo to get some wine. Cole seemed to shy away from the stuff, his disgust plainly visible in his eyes. Perhaps he had indeed suffered a bad experience with alcohol earlier in his life. But Lacoza didn't seem willing to let his bottle go – his love for wine was also plainly visible.

Lawrence pulled a bottle of spirits out from their luggage. A bottle of distilled vintage.. Holo seemed to think Lawrence had a special reason to have her purchase it. He couldn't help but imagine her playfully hitting him in the arm. It was always riddle after riddle.. was he simply too stupid to understand? His confidence began to falter.. but only for a moment.

A cheer suddenly rang out.. but nothing special had happened. A fireball had simply appeared on the riverbank where the sun had set. It was only an illusion of the sun, though the flames that jumped from the damaged cloth and bits of broken barrels were quite real - someone had generously contributed oil to help them produce the effect.

As black smoke rose like some skeleton into the sky, yellow flames burned with vigor. During a winter journey, a fire like this could gather a large number of people. There was no one leading, but everyone still raised their cups for a toast. And then something interesting happened.

The person talking with Holo truly was a traveling performer. She and a few others jumped out of the crowd and used the wood on the shore as their stage. A song of flutes and drums began, and they began to dance.

Then some young men jumped up and tried to dance along. But they probably hadn't had enough wine yet.. they couldn't dance like court performers from a palace, they simply danced by jumping. Others sometimes laughed, sometimes sang. Some, like Lacoza, were having

drinking competitions.

But no one was beside Lawrence. His thin smile was suddenly wiped away when he felt something in the darkness the fire had made more bleak. Only one person would bother coming to him: Holo.

“Bleah.. I have never talked so much. My throat is parched.”

She spoke to herself as she stole the cup from Lawrence's hand and drank it in one go. But it was hardly the same thing as normal wine or beer. Her eyes closed and her mouth twisted. She then exhaled and squatted down. Had she given up on ignoring him?

“Did you have a fun discussion with that woman-”

He cut himself off as she turned her head away from him. That was hardly surprising, she wasn't willing to listen after all. But he was surprised at how happy he was to see her behaving this way.

“Damn.. so cold tonight.”

She didn't respond.. she didn't so much as glance in his direction. But, as though they were on the seat in his wagon, she was leaning her body against his. He wondered if she was forcing herself, but it dawned on him that he was the one forcing himself.

He had no evidence to believe it, but he suspected that Holo would forgive him if he apologized to her now. He didn't understand - it was just that simple. Of course she'd be angry, but now she should be able to look down on him while happily accepting his apology.

He wanted to resist apologizing to her. She would grow impatient, raising her head, then scold him with heavy sarcasm. But she wouldn't stand up or leave.. because he would hear her more clearly if she was closer to him. He didn't want to consider that wishful thinking. If he wasn't sure about this, he would have to suspect everything that had taken place between them on their journey together.

He smiled in self-deprecation. She seemed to notice this and her ears shifted underneath her hood. It was as if she fully anticipated his upcoming apology, and just how nauseating it would be. And so, he answered her expectation.

“Such a lovely dance.. those traveling performers sure are-”

“What!?”

“Huh?”

She jumped up and shouted as if he had just stepped on her tail. She didn't give any further reply. She sure hated it when he improvised lines in the play she had written. Her tail was waving vigorously and she was making awkward noises – it was obvious that she was furious. But it sure was worth it.

“I, I may have caught a cold.. my nose does not feel well..”

Her voice was trembling. He wondered if was out of sheer rage at his feigned idiocy, or because she was trying her hardest not to laugh. She swallowed some more liquor - and any words she might have had along with it - before hiccuping.

The pair was silent as each tried to anticipate the other's next action. They blinked their eyes, and the sun sank another inch. They blinked again, and another star appeared in the sky.

The people gathered around the fire had forgotten their bad luck with a fun celebration. It didn't matter if they were merchants or oarsmen. Life was too short to waste. They played a flute, banged on a drum, or sang jokes about their misfortune. Some women held bands and danced seductively, and others held bottles while clumsily dancing along.

Lawrence was thinking hard, about what Holo would be thinking. And then he realized that Holo would soon become active once she'd had enough liquor. Given the atmosphere around them, she wouldn't stick around for long. She'd rather not waste time matching wits with a brooding merchant in the face of such festivities.

She raised her head and looked at his face. She must have planned to continue ignoring him, having told him she wouldn't speak to him. But she would feel bad to just leave him to his own devices. That's just how she was. So he returned the favor and ignored her, taking back the bottle.

“When you have spirits, the cold doesn't feel so bad.”

Upon hearing this, Holo smiled.. it seemed to be a reaction to them both being stubborn. She finally reciprocated, gently caressing his hand before standing up. She wanted to dance, but was worried that her ears and tail would be seen if her cloak flew up.

Her eyes shone.. they must have shone exactly this way as she read about the festivals she participated in long ago in Lenos. If she got too happy and playful, she might even let her tail out and end up with a nickname like “Sweepertail” - or change into her wolf form and make a mess of things. That shouldn't be allowed to happen.

She was carefully arranging and tying her cloak and belt. It seemed she had every intention of enjoying herself and dancing. Watching her carefully prepare so, Lawrence suddenly came up with a clever line.

“Why don't you change into your wolf form and pull the-”

But he didn't finish. It wasn't because her facial expression changed, and it wasn't because she cut him off.. it's not like she would actually change, and he was quite obviously joking. It wasn't even because he was too embarrassed to finish saying his line. It was because it was tough to imagine Holo changing into her wolf form for just anybody.

Lawrence knew why.. and that conclusion lead to another. Holo smiled. But Lawrence's face contorted. He understood why she was angry.

“You fool.”

Holo seemed stunned into laughter. She looked around, then suddenly crouched. She placed her arms around his neck, and sat her light body in his lap. Any man should be happy about that, but right now he was so angry he simply ignored her.

“One can flatter a pig right up a tree, but flattering a male just makes him lose himself.. remember when I said that?”

Holo had shifted her face to his ear, their faces nearly touching. He knew she was staring at him with half-closed eyes. He also knew that she had looked around not because she hoped no was looking.. it was quite the opposite.

Not far from them, Cole was struggling to free his eyes from Lacoza's hands. Lacoza was laughing heartily. Of course the others were savoring this like a fine cheese to go with their wine. Lawrence wasn't embarrassed.. he was just unhappy.

“If you were in my place, you would have been angry too, right?”

Her hate-filled tone had a terrible impact. It was enough to make one think she would bite off their ears. But it was nothing compared to the real terror of her ways. It seemed she was incapable of simply killing her prey quickly; she preferred to toy with them painfully before delivering the coup de grâce.

“Hmph.”

Holo released her arms and sat up straight, looking down on him, baring her fangs and spoke.

“Show me how sorry you are.”

She pressed her finger to his nose, and he was unable to do anything in retaliation. She smiled, stood up and turned away like the wind. Only her body temperature and a sweet scent remained. But her smile wasn't what stuck in his craw. As the one holding the wallet, her words were unbearable.

“How sorry I am?”

He whispered under his breath while taking another drink. He had suggested that Holo ponder the riddle of the coins because she had a quick mind. She had a knack for knowing when to encourage him and when to ridicule him. That incredible mind was a great help. As such he suspected that she loved solving riddles. But that wasn't the truth.

Lacoza had given him a riddle: the river flows.. but why? Lawrence now understood that riddle. Lacoza's kind were only able to do their jobs because the river never stopped flowing. But they never assumed that it would *keep* flowing.. they were always grateful to the river nymphs for their mercy.

Usually Holo would get angry with Lawrence due to his lack of trust. But when trust wasn't an issue he'd sometimes fail to notice things. For instance, if one's lover was always sending him letters, she was probably keen on writing letters. But if he asked her to help him write a letter to someone else, she would surely be upset.

Holo would help Lawrence think things through, but it wasn't what made her happy. That's what Lacoza was trying to say. And it was pretty obvious if he had considered it from that angle. She wasn't just doing it because she liked to solve puzzles, but he completely missed the point.. that's why she was angry.

He slouched his shoulders. Holo was always teaching him lessons. That's why her smile was so

difficult to face. He straightened up, and took another drink.

“How *should* I show I'm sorry?”

He breathed out air scented with wine, then raised his head to look at Holo as she danced. He kept getting the feeling she was glancing at him from time to time. It made him cringe to think about much of his hard-earned money it might take to appease her with needlessly-exotic “apologies.”

Holo was holding hands and dancing with the female performer. It seemed as if they were quite familiar with the dance. The people around them clapped and whistled to encourage the two young beauties. Even the cloth-and-wood stage seemed to not want to lose to them; as they jumped upon it sparks flew off as though the Devil was exhaling.

Holo almost looked like she was delirious with fever. A slight smile was draped across her otherwise-serious face.. it was as if she was dancing the dance of a ghost. Perhaps it was just her charming demeanor fooling him, but she seemed to be trying to forget about everything. Since ancient times, dancing celebrations had been used as a means to comfort and appease the gods and nymphs. Perhaps that's why Holo looked the way she did.

He was about to continue drinking, but suddenly paused - she had just confirmed that she did such things for his sake, didn't she? What else could she mean?

“Is she *serious*?”

That body of hers, dancing happily as if she cared about nothing else right now, seemed somehow smaller to him than usual.

If Lawrence was on the money, this was funnier than any joke. His brain worked slower than hers, and she was always in two steps ahead.. but *this* was how she chose to reveal that it was because she cared for him, and not just a flight of fancy.

His throat was burning from the liquor. He stood up, but with no intention of joining the dance. If he was going to be stubborn, at least he could stubbornly collect information for Holo.

Cole was already sleeping on the ground next to the people around Lacoza. Lawrence looked at that group and waved to Lacoza, who responded by raising his cup.

Holo was not a very wise wolf when it came to daily life. He badly wanted to tell her so.

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“Ahahahahahah!! In the Roef mountains?”

“Oooh.. that's a great place! Lots of top-quality lumber! It's sent down the river to the south (hic) where they turn it into nice round tables! Pretty neat, huh, my young traveling merchant!?”

Lacoza poured a wineskin into the bottle Lawrence was holding. It wasn't as easy as pouring it into a bucket, and both of their hands were shaking. The wine didn't make it into the bottle; it drained to the ground. But no one cared. Lawrence was quite drunk.. he wasn't thinking straight anymore.

“Then how's about we carve *this* into some wood.. 'The tariffs are too expensive!’”

“Ohohoho! Hear, hear!”

Lawrence shouted, and lifted up a wineskin to pour it down his throat. But another boatman knocked the skin, and the wine spilled to the ground.

“So what else is there about Roef?”

“Roef? Ah.. such good wood..”

Lacoza started to repeat himself, but collapsed.

“This is going nowhere..”

The other boatmen didn't seem to care. In fact they seemed happily buzzed. Lawrence smiled while observing their faces and waiting for them to clumsily speak.

“It shhhould be fine to tell him, eh?”

“Hah! Well, Jarell losht, so letshh get him to talk.”

The boatman named Jarell had just lost the latest round in their drinking match.

“Didn't think the guy wissh the girl.. would be sho.. popular..”

“Yeah, yeah.. but a real man knowsh when he'sh lost.”

“Riiight, riiiight..”

“Oh, you wanna hear about Roef?”

Lacoza finally got up and cut them off. He seemed ready for more drinking; his face looked like it did when he was sober. The others weren't speaking intelligibly, so Lawrence wasn't going to get anywhere with them. And it wasn't as though he was confident he would be able to stay awake much longer.

“Yeah.. or a place named Yoitsu..”

“Yoitsu? No idea. But you don't gotta worry about Roef.. that stream's just upriver from here, you can just walk along the riverside..”

“That much is obvious!” thought Lawrence, but he was unable to arrange his thoughts into reasonable sentences.. he was drunk. And asking about Roef was just a conversation-starter. He wanted to move on to another, bigger topic.

“Any other interesting places?”

“Interesting..?”

Lacoza stroked his chin and looked at the others. But everyone seemed drunk, and were stumbling and falling around.

“Well, yeah.”

With one hand still on his chin, he poked his colleague with the other.

“Hey, pay attention, Jarell! Didn't you say you just got a strange job?”

“Eh.. oooh.. I can't remember anymore.”

“You ass! Didn't you say it was a job from Lisco on the Roef mountain stream?”

Jarell the boatman was still in a drinking match with Lawrence. Apparently he was drinking to

relieve the pain of having his head hit by his wife for finding him with another woman. Having heard that, Lawrence shuddered to think whether he'd could survive Holo finding him wandering around with another girl.

“Lisco? That'sh a nice place.. they mine copper there.. like, *rivers* of copper.. and the wine there'sh the best! What were they called.. they've got a lotta those things to make liquor.. oh! Beautiful coppery brides! Blessed with smooth skin like fiery water!”

Jarell closed his eyes as he shouted. It looked like he couldn't decide on sleeping or talking. But after that, he stopped moving. Lacoza jabbed in the shoulder again, but his body had gone limp as a jellyfish.

“It's hopeless.”

“Coppery.. brides? Oh, he's talking about stills isn't he?”

“Yeah, that's it.. jeez, you really know your stuff. Sometimes stills are shipped with other things. Maybe that stuff you're drinking now was made in a still made in Lisco.”

Curving thin copper plates into a lovely shapes, then artfully combining them into a shiny red still.. it was an incredible process. People judged the beauty of these copper stills like they judged the beauty of women.. it was quite a metaphor.

“Yeah.. he's out. He'll not open his eyes 'till morning.”

“A strange.. job..”

It seemed Lawrence was also at his limit - his sentences were breaking. How was Holo? Worried, he looked around for her. But he couldn't see her among the drunken partiers.

“Oh right.. about that strange job- Oh? Hahaha! She's nimble as a cat! You know, that somehow suits her..”

Lacoza laughed as he spoke. He had spotted Holo dancing cheerfully. Her cloak was off and her tail floating through the air, as she spun hand-in-hand with the female dancer.

But showing her “features” should be alright now, people would just think her ears and tail were decorations. Though Lawrence was surprised at how daring she was, no one around her seemed to notice or care. Looking closer, she had put on a squirrel-leather cap which should

help make her ears and tail look like decorations.

Holo was daring enough to do anything, which always made Lawrence uneasy.. he couldn't neglect the fact that her wits were dulled when she was drunk. What would happen if others found out? Lawrence was concerned, but she looked incredibly happy. Her long hair and waving tail looked almost magical.

“So.. about that job..”

Lacoza pulled Lawrence out of his trance. Back in Lenos, Holo had asked Lawrence which was more important to him: her or money. That question was far too easy to answer right now. He *must* be drunk. Why else would he be letting his mind wander like this? He prodded his temples in an attempt to clear his mind. He then listened carefully to Lacoza.

“Turns out Jarell's shipped bills of exchange for some company a few times. After hearing you talkin' on my boat, I'm a bit worried about that ass.. maybe he got himself involved in something shady. I can't help but suspect it's that coin company you were talkin' about.”

Companies who supplied coins were very close to being a central power. As such, not many coins would usually be shipped at once. A town's economy might be bolstered by having a copper mine, but as businesses became intertwined it became equally difficult to prevent collusion between those businesses and merchants.

Lacoza spoke very quietly.. probably because he was talking about the companies that helped him earn his keep. But because of that it wasn't tough to see why Lacoza was so interested in Lawrence's investigations. So in spite of being unable to see or speak clearly, Lacoza's words calmed his mind.

“But that's.. that's like a butcher.. delivering letters..”

Butchers were always traveling between villages to purchase pigs and goats. Because of those daily travels, they were often asked by people to deliver letters for them. Likewise, boats were always traveling up and down the Roam river, so it was just as natural that they would be asked to carry paperwork between their customers.

“I've heard that when he takes bills of exchange from Lisco to D'Jean's Company in Gerube, each time they send him back with a rejection certificate.”

“Certificates rejecting bills of exchange?”

Lawrence was suddenly quite sober.

Rather than paying in cash, businesses would use bills of exchange. The recipient and amount was written on them, and a legal exchange could take place. Of course, a rejection certificate meant the that D'Jeans Company refused to negotiate the exchange. But it was quite odd for bills of exchange to be rejected every time.

“Suspicious, huh? They keep sending bills of exchange that are always refused. They know what'll happen, so they must be up to something.”

“They may have a legitimate reason.”

“A reason?”

“Yeah. Bills of exchange are always used when a currency is transported. But the exchange rates on money always change. By the time they get the bill of exchange, the rates might have changed since it was sent. If that happens.. rejecting it is reasonable..”

Lacoza was taking this too seriously. But then, people who had money could go anywhere they wanted and buy or sell whatever they wanted. Traveling merchants could be considered as having a kind of freedom. Lacoza's kind had to keep working on the same river shipping goods.. if they angered their clientele, their wallets would be bone dry no matter how high the waters rose.

They couldn't always afford to stand by their principles. That's why they were always unreasonably used to do strange jobs. It was their bodies that would end up sinking to the bottom of the river. Being a boatman was a more relaxing profession than being a horse-and-cart merchant.. this was true. But horse carts were free to go just about anywhere.

“So.. I think you should stay calm.. I don't think there's a need to worry so much.”

Lawrence stretched his neck and yawned. Lacoza looked at him in surprise and sighed in disdain.

“Hmph.. there are too many problems on this Earth..”

“Not knowing is a sin, but one cannot know everything.”

Lawrence's vision was growing darker and darker; he could no longer keep his eyelids open. He could only see Lacoza seated before him. "I'm already at my limit" he thought to himself.

"You're right.. hehe.. we've been smilingly watching this clumsy lad, but we're no better. Even if he was cheated into buying those papers, he probably outpaces us in some other talent."

Lacoza spoke while rudely nudging Cole's head. The boy had fallen asleep, unable to stand the liquor. Lacoza appeared to feel quite sorry for him. Even if he couldn't pay enough, Lacoza might have let him stay aboard his boat.

"Church.. Law, was it?"

"Hmm? Ah, yeah, that's right."

"Why would he bother with such complicated things? If he stays on my boat, he doesn't have to do such crazy things to eat three meals a day.. well, make that two."

Lawrence smiled upon hearing Lacoza correct himself. An unskilled worker would have to work hard to eat 3 decent meals a day.

"He has his reasons."

After Lawrence said this, Lacoza stared at him.

"You didn't secretly convince him while you two walked, did you?"

His eyes were narrowed, but his show of anger was clearly because he too had an appreciation for the boy. Lacoza was old enough to train an apprentice to succeed him in his livelihood. Had Lawrence been a bit older, he might indeed have used every trick in the book to try to recruit Cole as his apprentice.

"Alas, no.. but I have confirmed his determination and sharpness of mind."

Lacoza folded his arms, and Lawrence heard him whisper to himself, "perhaps all we can do for him is some small favors." He then hiccuped and laughed his unrestrained boatman's laugh.

"Ahahaha! Haha! You're right. Here's what I'll do.. if he can help make real sense of this coin conspiracy, then he'll be worthy of a reward."

“That's just what he planned.”

“Why would he? Weren't you going to give him some cash to help him out?”

Lacoza leaned in, as though the two were discussing some shady back-road business deal, but Lawrence just shrugged.

“Sorry, but no. I considered it.. I mean, I could just be kind this once, and he'd be happy for now.. but then-”

Lawrence did find it a pleasant thought. He of course wanted to convince Cole to travel with him.. but he no longer felt the same urge to convince the boy as he had while they walked around the river.

It was simply too early for him to have an apprentice. And this was hardly the right time or place. When someone's preparing a fine dish, it's rude for others to hover over them asking to nibble at it. Lawrence smiled bitterly at that thought.

“So.. anyway.. three crates is a lot. You can only ship 'em on water, and if they went down the river my ears would have heard about it. Or maybe those papers were lying?”

Lacoza's tone of voice had become odd.. it seemed that his drinking was finally catching up with him.

“Maybe.. money is like an eel in the hand..”

“Ah.. that's certainly the case. Hehe.. speaking of funny things, I remember hearing that it took several years to figure this out.”

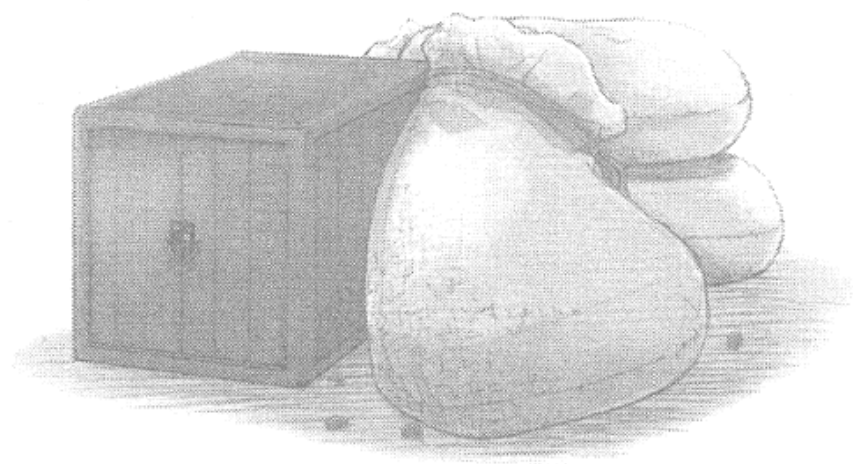
“Huh?”

Lawrence had finally reached his limit.. his mind and body were drifting apart. He knew he was facing Lacoza, but his vision went black and the voice sounded like it came from a great distance.

Roef.. mountain stream.. Lisco.. and something about the bones of hell's guard dog..? No way.. Lawrence must have drifted off into a dream. Some crazy, fairy tale-like dream where the last sentence he heard - “this has happened to me” - was pulled into the body of that dark devil known as sleep.

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Chapter 5

He smelled a sweet scent, mixed together with the scent of something that was burnt.. was it charred honey-bread? If so, the shopkeeper needed to get their act together or they'd be a laughing stock. But slowly it became clear that it wasn't something burnt. It reminded him of bonfire.. and was that the scent of an animal?

“Ugh..”

He opened his eyes and could only see the starry sky. A nearly full moon shone down beautifully, hanging in the sky as if floating in a pool.

It felt like someone had placed a blanket on him. How fortunate.. he didn't have to shiver and curl his body up. But why was he so heavy? How much did he drink?

When he tried to sit up, he finally discovered what that weight was. He raised his head.. pulled back the blanket.. and there was Holo, asleep on him, her face covered in soot.

“I see..”

She must have danced the night away. Some of the hair around her forehead was singed. Even her snores smelled burnt somehow. They were mixed with her own sweet scent and her tail's odor. “Is that what I smelled in my dream?” he wondered.

She had fallen asleep without even putting on her robe. Her ears were plainly visible now, but the squirrel-leather cap was beside her so she had thought to cover her ears. Oh well.. if no Church-going devotee was pointing a lance at them, then no one should have noticed her true nature. He breathed out to calm himself, then relaxed his neck and let his head back down.

He took his hand out from under the blanket and rested it on her head. Her ears twitched violently, and her snoring ceased. Suddenly, her body contorted as if she was about to sneeze. Her limbs twitched about clumsily, and her face followed suit. Her chin was resting on his chest, supporting her head. The eyes that finally greeted the waking world were watery.

“You're heavy.”

Holo did not reply. She pulled her head back and and contorted again, on purpose, as if letting

out a tremendous yawn. But given that her nails were scratching at him, she was clearly faking it. After that she raised her face and finally spoke.

“What is the problem?”

“So.. heavy..”

“Well my body is light, so it must be something else you are feeling.”

“This is where I'm supposed to say it's your emotional burdens?”

“That would make it seem as though I forced you to.”

Holo giggled and rubbed her ashen face on his chest.

“You little devil.. no one saw, did they?”

“You mean whose room I fell asleep in?”

In his heart he wished she would have said “whose bed.”

“Hmm.. probably not. We were all quite wild last night. T'would have been even better had you joined me.”

“I can imagine. But I didn't want to get burned.”

He was playing with her singed hair. Her eyes were closed as if she was enjoying it. Some of her hair would have to be trimmed. He wanted to tell her she had gone overboard this time, but she spoke first.

“Some of the girls were from the north.. they just performed in Nyohhira, actually. From what they said it has not changed much since I was there.”

After speaking she opened her eyes, gazed at his fingers, then rubbed her face into his chest again like a spoiled cat. She was probably trying to rub the emotions off of her face. Her expression made it obvious that she trying her best to suppress those emotions, which were like waves on the sea.

“So stubborn.”

After hearing him say this, she curled up her body like a small child.

“But we're in no rush to get to the north.. we're still after Eve.”

Holo's ears were next to the skin of his chest.. he was certain she could sense his laughter. She scratched his chest in protest and puffed air out of her nose.

“Mmhm.”

“..could you move over? I'd like to get a drink of water..”

He drank so much liquor that his throat was still burning. He was also hoping to see what time it was - the middle of night, or just before daybreak? Holo didn't budge an inch. She was being playful again.

But after a while, she did finally sit up straight. Then, still sitting upon him, she arched her back as if to howl, and yawned at the moon. It seemed sensual, but also oddly spiritual in a way. The sight left Lawrence entranced.

After a spectacular yawn, she shut her mouth. Her eyes were full of tears. She put on a gentle smile and looked down on him.

“It really *is* best for me to be on the top.”

“Of course.. that way you have someone to sit upon.”

Under the moon, her lupine ears seemed to shine a pale green. When her ears moved it was as if they were powder scattering the moonlight.

“I too would like some water.. hmm.. where is my robe?”

Lawrence kept himself from saying “what's that around your waist?” Instead, he relaxed and gazed up at the sky.



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It should be the middle of the night, about the time that monks in their monasteries would be waking to sing their daily prayers. But not everyone around them was asleep on the ground; some men still sat around the fire.

“Aiya-le!”

One of the men had noticed them, and raised his hand while shouting. Holo smiled at him and waved her hand back.

“What was that?”

“A traditional greeting. I was told that people still use it in the mountains of Roef.”

Having been told so by Holo, Lawrence felt as though his role as Holo's guide to the modern world was coming to an end. They were already in the north, and this was her territory.

He thought about how she must have felt standing in the wheat fields, her face soaked in memories of things that would never happen again. Part of him felt he ought to ask if she wanted to stop this trip to Gerube and just head straight home.. but he knew if he asked that she would become angry again. That, and it wasn't as if he wanted to risk cutting their trip short.

“Oh, the little guy is up.”

Her words ended his bleak train of thought. People had fallen asleep where they pleased, but they were all basically gathered together. On one edge of the group, a small body was stirring. His eyes, still bleary from the liquor, thought it looked just like Holo. Indeed, it was Cole.

“What's he doing?”

“Hmm.. t'would appear that he is writing.”

His figure was clear enough in the moonlight, but Lawrence couldn't make out what he was doing. He might be trying to keep himself from wasting his time away. After all, he had nothing but time on his hands right now.

“In any event.. let's drink some water. My throat is parched.”

“Mmhm.”

Lawrence held a leather waterskin Holo had taken from someone. He took it to the river and untied the string keeping it closed. Of course it was empty, but there were numerous bite marks near it's opening. He stared at Holo, but she averted her eyes.

If she had a habit of biting things, she was hiding it from him. Did it bother her if she retained some animal instincts? Probably not.. it was far more likely that she felt such childish habits were beneath her status as a wise wolf.

Lawrence smiled, but that smile was difficult to see in the moonlight. He filled the waterskin. In the dead of a winter's night, river water was as cold as melting ice. Upon gulping some of it down, a sharp pain spread through his mouth and down his throat.. but that first drop of water after heavy drinking was worth it's weight in gold.

“Give it!”

Holo snatched the waterskin from his hands and quickly drank from it. Amusingly, she got her just desserts and started choking.

“So what other interesting tidbits did you hear?”

Lawrence patted her on the back as she coughed. But he had noticed that only her shoulders were shaking. He had to bite his tongue to keep from saying “can't you just be honest if you want to be taken care of?” She coughed and spoke.

“Ugh.. interesting tidbits?”

“For instance, about Nyohhira?”

“Ah. Well.. no one knew it was called Nyohhira, but the legend of the Moon-Hunting Bear was surprisingly well-known.”

Even Lawrence knew of that legend, so it would be quite odd for no one in this region to. It was a monster spoken of for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years. He hesitated on whether he should tease her about it, but if she got angry then it was just because she was still drunk.

“Does that make you jealous?”

Her fame didn't compare to the fame of the Bear. She wasn't a widespread legend. Of course in Pasloe, all the children knew her name.. but the Bear's legend was on an entirely different scale.

Both of them being ancient beings, perhaps she would have a competitive attitude about it. But then again, she should have long ago outgrown such simple-minded attitudes. Just as he was about to correct himself, she spoke.

“Just who do you think I am?”

In her right hand was the waterskin, and her left was placed at her waist. She stood proudly as she replied, appearing every bit a Wisewolf. It *was* a dumb thing for him to say, so he was about to agree with her, but she cut him off once more and continued.

“I am the type who surpasses others later in life. Some day I shall do something great.”

She then laughed, baring her fangs. She was several hundred years old, but still had the gall to suggest she would “some day” do something great. She truly had no shame. It mattered not a jot if she was a Wisewolf.. she was still Holo.

“I have no love of being praised, but if ever there should be a book of my life it would be a thick one indeed.”

“Haha.. then shall I write one?”

Merchants commonly wrote books, especially autobiographies - an odd tendency. Of course they had no talent - it was impossible for them to create a great work of literature. But should they have some money before they died, they might hire a proper writer to do the job justice.

“Hmm.. if it was *you* writing, then surely it would be all about our travels, no?”

“But of course.”

“Well then, that shan't do.”

“Why not?”

Holo coughed at his question.

“You have more enthusiasm to spread ink on my face than on paper.”

“..was that supposed to be witty?”

Holo laughed and continued.

“You are the type who does not even blink while lying. You will inevitably write something thoughtlessly out of character, and it will become a work of fiction, will it not?”

She raised her head, clearly holding back laughter, as if she had read all of his stupid thoughts. He was a merchant, after all. But he realized what she working toward and replied.

“So you're saying that my face is so thick with lies that I could write a book on it?”

Holo released her laughter voicelessly, her shoulders shaking. She hit him in the arm, ending another playfully childish discussion.

“But you know, I could only ask about Nyohhira. They told me that few ventured deep into the mountains of Roef.. that it was a dark place.”

“What?”

Lawrence responded reflexively. Holo wore a smile, but Lawrence could tell her heart was wounded. She always put on a brave front about such things. If she was acting too happy she was invariably hiding something. But she pretended not to hear Lawrence's response.

“There are 20 places with hot springs gushing out. The earth is cracked, and steam billows out as if the world was ending. That is the same as I remember it, but I heard one unpleasant bit of news. The one secret spring I knew of has been discovered now; a spring in a narrow valley. It seems I will only be able to go to the springs in this form now..”

People believed there was a fairy tending to every hot spring. The harder it was to get to the spring, the more thankful the fairy would be for the effort invested, and the more effectively the spring would heal. As such, half the people who went to Nyohhira went hoping to find new springs. It was inevitable that her secret would be discovered sooner or later.

By her face he knew she was disappointed, but Lawrence understood that she wasn't really upset about the hot springs. She had unconsciously mentioned that the mountains of Roef were

considered dark places. It was a careless slip of the tongue, but clearly the reason she was upset.

How did the boatmen describe the region of Roef? Copper flowed like rivers. It was so rich they could afford to manufacture stills and copper plates. And Lacoza had shipped many coins of copper down the Roam river. Of course the common element was copper, which was as precious as firewood or the “black gems” of coal.

Holo must have heard this news from the traveling performers. If they said such a lively region was “dark”, they wouldn't be talking about it being poor and desolate. They would mean that it had become inhospitable; barren forests and polluted river water, floods and landslides, and thieves lurking in every dark corner.

Of course traveling performers might just be talking about the quality of their audiences, but even so the moral quality of an audience was determined by their environment. Even the holy scriptures had written in them that “bad trees bore bad fruit, good trees bore good fruit.”

“Hehe.. it is too difficult to fool you with such things.”

Lawrence hesitated, not knowing what to say. Holo beat him to the punch.

“There are people mining there.. more and more people go there as time passes. I am mentally prepared, somewhat.”

Her words didn't seem to match the truth within her heart. From what had happened to her in Pasloe, she knew this was all leading to. When people no longer needed a god, they found their own wisdom.

“However, you-”

She stepped once, then twice, atop the stones exposed in the river. On the third step she looked back at him.

“This is something for my heart to worry about. Seeing your face makes it difficult for me to worry about myself.”

This girl might just be too proud for her own good. It would be far too easy to make a counter-attack.. but Lawrence found himself unable to say anything. Firstly, there was no way he could simply stop worrying. And secondly, Yoitsu might be in even worse shape than they expected.

Holo might be in for a rough time.

But she wasn't embarrassed. She seemed to feel that this was a natural inevitability. And she also seemed to feel that that she could go on after facing such a tragic event. Lawrence thought about this and reflected. She wasn't a girl who could be understood by appearance alone.

“Well, alright.. should the situation truly be so dire, then I shall permit you to lend me your chest. But you will need an appointment first.”

When hearing this from a girl like Holo there was only one response.

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Hehehe.. now it is *your* turn. Did *you* hear any *interesting tidbits*?”

She pressed him to walk forward and looked over at the men that had gathered to discuss something.

“What was it..? Mr. Lacoza said something..”

It seemed Lawrence's mind was still hazy from drinking. He couldn't remember much of anything. Normally what he'd seen and heard was neatly filed away. He tapped his head repeatedly.

“..something really funny.. but I couldn't laugh..”

“Was it about the little one?”

Holo pointed at Cole, who was still poking about on the ground. His memories started to return.

“Oh, yeah! Huh? Was it..?”

“What else would you talk about with that boatman? You two *were* competing over the boy, right?”

“No, we weren't.. Lacoza seemed to have his heart set on him.”

They had been scheming on how to convince Cole once they got to Gerube. Even if he studied Church Law - assuming he could make it through all that - he might not be able to become a

senior priest. Considering that, Lawrence also believed it would be better for him to become Lacoza's apprentice. Of course that was just his opinion. However, Holo suddenly stared at him.

“What about *you*?”

“What.. *about* me?”

He ambiguously avoided her gaze and stopped talking. He *was* willing to accept Cole, but it was too soon for an apprentice. He also had his other reasons.

“I waited so long in Pasloe village for a traveler who could help me.. but luck never came. You can trust my judgment of a person's character.”

Lawrence suddenly realized that they had been holding hands.. he didn't know for how long.

“And even if he grows close to me, he would not become your rival.”

Lawrence intentionally turned away and sighed, making her giggle. He didn't know what to say, and so he just stared off into the distance. Had she noticed his true suspicion? Why he thought she was pushing Cole to be his apprentice?

“In any case things are going well. When I heard the boat was unable to move on, I thought there would be a larger mess.”

“You're looking forward to moving on, huh?”

Hearing his question, she simply raised her face, with it's complication expression. She didn't nod. She didn't shake her head. She just looked off into the distance and spoke.

“I had wanted a relaxing trip, but it seems that peril always hunts after you. And when I have naught but time to dwell on that fact, I get a bit cranky.”

Indeed she was reflecting on it, counting off the events of past days on her fingers. Of course it was enough to make one cranky. Maybe she *was* happier if they got into trouble all the time so she didn't have a chance to dwell on things and get “a little cranky”. But it seemed out of the ordinary for Holo to say something like this, so he intentionally egged her on.

“I guess it's not good to be *too* clever after all.”

He knew she would counter-attack, and then he could reply with such-and-such a response. His mind was already planning ahead.. but no counter-attack came. How odd. He looked over at her, and saw her frowning.

“Too clever?”

It wasn't anger, her look was one of confusion. But he couldn't understand why she reacted so unexpectedly. The two of them were swallowed by silence until she finally spoke.

“Ah.”

Lawrence was worried that his tease was going to light another fire - he did understand why it might produce such an awkward atmosphere. They looked each other in the eyes, and time stopped again. They faced away from each other in embarrassment, wincing.

“You know I was merely asking them for news, correct? You have not jumped to any strange conclusions, have you?”

Lawrence was stunned, and one of his eyebrows lifted up. Of course he hoped he was guessing wrong, but he really did think he was right.

“What an odd reaction.. you sure do worry a lot.”

Lawrence trusted his intuition, and so he hopped to its defense.

“I should say the same to you. I can only see one reason you would so enthusiastically push for Cole to be my apprentice.”

She pulled her face back. Oh? So he *was* right. At first she might have just been helping Cole out of kindness, but her doting afterward was rather excessive.. even asking Lawrence to take him as his apprentice. She wasn't simply doing this out of kindness to the boy.

And if her actions were truly for Lawrence's sake, what reason could she have? It only took a moment to reach the logical conclusion. Both of them were worrying about the same thing. They sat up against each other, side-by-side, staring into each other's eyes as if to stupidly tell each other “you are weaker, so I must protect you.”

“Ah! Alright! Just say what you want to say!”

He gave up first, letting his arms fall and sighed. Holo also sighed.

“It seems when we have little to do, our minds are good for nothing.”

“We just can't think about ourselves.”

She smiled, and took his hand once more.

“We understand how useless it is to worry about the future.. but it is too difficult to ignore.”

“It would be wrong completely ignore it, but yes.. it's really tough.”

If they were at the peak of their happiness, then it was true: no matter where they went it would only be downhill. Even if they were concerned about one another, if they continued on this topic they would never speak with optimism. It seemed she had noticed that as well, and ended the conversation.

“Very well.. then let us change topics.”

Lawrence approved.

“Since we are all awake, and it is cold, then let us call the little one over to share a few drinks with us.”

“*More* drinking?”

Lawrence was stunned. Holo left without answering, her ears moving under her hood.

“Couldn't these guys have gone to sleep more sensibly?”

It was as if they had all fallen randomly from the sky and fell asleep where they landed. There was no way to walk among them in anything resembling a straight line. Well, this *was* a riverbank, so it was alright.. at an inn, someone would surely have raised a stink.

If they had just lined up properly, they could be sleeping comfortably with their limbs stretched out. Perhaps they just preferred sleeping all curled up? Lawrence had been forced to not sleep in inns before because of his preference. As he remembered this, he noticed something odd.

He looked at the way they were arranged on the ground.. their forms, direction, number.. what

was this strange feeling that came over him? He pressed his fingers to his temples, his mind still woozy, and ran smack-dab into Holo, who had suddenly stopped. He stared at her, having completely lost his train of thought.

“Young Cole.”

It seemed that just as Cole liked Holo, she liked him as well. Fox, Bird, “You”.. Holo never called a person by their name. Lawrence wondered how often she had called *him* by name; once, maybe twice.. and each of those was an embarrassing memory.

“Hmm?”

She voiced surprise that he didn't respond. Had he fallen asleep? Holo and Lawrence looked at each other, then walked up to the boy. He was wearing the robe Holo gave him, and drawing on the ground with a stick. Clearly he was awake.. just far too invested in what he was doing. Holo was about to call to him again, but he seemed to notice their footsteps behind him and suddenly turned his head.

“Ah!”

Lawrence shouted. Holo was stunned. Cole had been concentrating so hard that he had instinctively turned, looking at them in fear, then panicked and grabbed something on the ground next to him. From the metallic sound they heard, it was probably a coin. That, and his feet were covering something as he stood up. It wasn't just Holo who had good eyes, Lawrence also noticed that Cole was trying to cover a picture. But before he could ask, Cole erased it with his foot and responded.

“What's the matter?”

Through the hand he was holding, Lawrence could feel that Holo wanted to say “that is what we would like to ask *you*.” Clearly he wasn't the only one who felt suspicion. Cole was hiding something, it was obvious.

“Hmm. As we are awake at this quiet time, we were wondering if you would like to join us for a drink.”

“...”

Cole's face darkened immediately. He really did hate alcohol. He had become drunk at Lacoza's

urging, and then just fallen asleep..

“Ohoho.. I kid, I kid. Might you be hungry?”

“Um.. a bit.”

Cole had been drawing something small and circular. He had also erased another image that appeared to formed out of several circles, but they would never be able to see it now.

“You guys sure brought a lot of stuff with you, huh?”

“Huh? Yeah, we did, but..”

“But?”

Lawrence shrugged.

“We'll be all out once we've eaten now.”

Holo gave his shoulder a mild punch.

“Well, that settles it. Let's go sit by the fire, though.. it should be more comfortable.”

“But we'd get stuck with those guys if we eat there. Let's just borrow some fire and eat over here.”

“Alright, then please go find our luggage.”

One had danced the night away. The other got so drunk he didn't even cover himself with a blanket. It was hardly a surprise if they had misplaced their luggage. Together, they stared at Cole. He was stunned into responding.

“You mean *both* of you forgot where it is?”

If the boy did join them, this sort of thing might happen every day.

“Ohoho.. we were both drunk. Might you fetch it for us?”

“..Alright.”

Cole left, while they stood there together and watched him. This was nice. Of course, Holo remained at Lawrence's side. She also seemed to feel the same way, and was leaning against him. But they couldn't actually say it out loud.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

Holo seemed to change her mind about speaking, and shook her head.

“..it is nothing.”

“Really?”

Of course he knew what she wanted to say. But he also knew that he shouldn't let himself think about such things, so he changed the topic.

“By the way..”

“Hmm?”

“Cole's hometown is called Pinot, or something like that. Have you heard of it?”

In his haste, Cole stepped on a sleeping boatman's foot. He immediately apologized. Holo smiled, watching him from behind. She tightened her grip on Lawrence's hand.

“Why are you asking *me*?”

Her tone of voice was back to normal. He shot her a stare. Sure enough, her eyes looked sly as ever. She feigned surprise at his stare.

“What?”

“You..!”

“Hey, you, how should I know everything?”

Of *course* she would now feign ignorance. She was the type who would pretend to know less, when she really knew more. Even big matters were small to her heart. And Lawrence knew that

if he didn't shut his mouth, he would regret it. Until now, when she joked about things like this she had a reason.. she *always* did.

Cole was now being extra-careful, having stepped on someone. Holo laughed while she watched him, and Lawrence watched her smiling face. She didn't turn to meet his gaze, she simply sighed.

“I should probably take it easier next time.”

“If you could, you would have my eternal gratitude.”

At that moment, Cole returned.

“Is something wrong?”

“Ah.. no, we were just talking about your hometown.”

“Oh.”

A blunt reply. He was possibly thinking that there would be nothing notable about a poor village like his, feeling it to be unworthy of discussion. Had he felt otherwise, his eyes should be shimmering with nostalgia.

“T'was named Pinot, yes? Had it any legends?”

“Legends?”

Holo reached out to him to take their luggage, and Cole handed it to her.

“Mmhm.. surely there were one or two?”

“Um..”

Anyone would be caught off-guard with such an unexpected question. No matter the place, it would have it's share of superstitious tales.

“You've said the Churches' activities around your village were troublesome. So that region, including Pinot, must have had it's own gods.”

At Lawrence's urging, Cole seemed to snap back to reality. He nodded.

“Ah yes, Pinot is the name of a giant frog. Our elder told us he had once seen it himself.”

“Oh?”

That caught her attention. The three of them sat down. They handed him the bread and cheese to portion out.

“It's said that our village was originally someplace else.. but that place had been buried in a mudslide, and eventually became the bottom of a lake. Our elder, when he was a child, would climb up the mountain to help with the fox hunts. One day they saw a mudslide coursing down the valley toward the old village, leveling trees, but a huge frog leaped out to halt it.”

Such legends of gods protecting a village from destruction were very popular. The Church did their best to rewrite such tales with their own god replacing the local ones. But it seemed that didn't affect Cole, whose eyes were shimmered as he recounted the legend. Myths of gods and spirits were not fabrications.. at least, Lawrence could now accept that.

“And, as that god held back the slide, the hunters ran back to the village and warned them to flee. The villagers were all spared.”

After he finished his story, Cole realized how excitedly he had told it. He looked around to see if he had been too loud.

“Mhmmmm.. so there was a godly frog.. were there any others? Perhaps.. a wolf?”

It seemed Holo's patience had reached its limit. But Cole didn't even stop to think.

“Yes, many.”

Upon hearing this, Holo nearly dropped a piece of meat jerky that she was pulling out of a pouch. She managed to spare herself the embarrassment by popping it into her mouth instead. Her hands were shaking.. Lawrence noticed, but pretended not to.

“But their myths were more popular in Lupi.. I told you, yes Mr. Lawrence? About the village with the fox and owl trappers?”

“Ah yes.. the one that was conquered by the Church.”

Cole nodded with a smile. The Church conquered that village, and then Cole left on his journey.

“Lupi had a myth that one of their ancestors was actually a wolf.”

The jerky that hung from Holo's mouth twitched violently. Lawrence was impressed that it didn't fall from her mouth. He thought back to the time he had met a female chronicler in the pagan town of Kumerson. That chronicler, named Diana, had told him were many legends about men and gods falling in love and becoming paired. Back then, Holo was afraid of being lonely.. but she was different now. He hoped she wouldn't laugh at herself for fumbling the jerky.

“I later learned that the Church had gone to Lupi to go up against the wolf.”

“Against the wolf?”

“Indeed. But there was no god in Lupi.. apparently it had already died in the legend.”

How suspicious.. if the god had already died, why would the Church go fight it? It might make sense to say they were going there to convert it's people, thinking it would be easier since they now had no god. But then why would they later retreat? Had their leader fallen ill? It was a conundrum.

Perhaps they were simply looking for something? As soon as he thought this, Lawrence realized that must be it.. it was a search effort. The Church had gone to a remote village in the mountains because of their myth of a deceased god.

“The wolf god had been injured, and ended up in Lupi a long time ago. He died there in the village, but left behind a reward for their compassion.. his right forepaw and his seed. Over the generations, his descendants survived in that village, protected from disease and disaster by his forepaw. I heard that was the reason the Church went there.”

Cole seemed to not believe these tales; in his eyes they were just stories. Anyone who traveled would discover how large the world was. They would begin to lose their belief in myths and legends, thinking them convenient and simple-minded. It was a common experience.

“However, just like my village sinking to the bottom of a lake, I couldn't help but be suspicious about a god leaving his paw behind in Lupi.”

He smiled as he spoke. Once a person began to hear all the myths and legends out there, it became impossible for them to take them all seriously. For Cole, the stories were just a bit too unbelievable to be real.

But for Lawrence it was the opposite case. After meeting Holo he had come to realize that not all legends were make-believe. And being a merchant, his mind was always striving to make sense of strange pieces of information in order to sense opportunities.

His hazy memories began to return to him, including what Lacoza had told him before he passed out. Lawrence felt this was quite a lucky coincidence.. in fact it was too much of a coincidence. He wanted to be sure of it.

“Then I take it that you do not believe in all of these myths and legends?”

Holo seemed to sense that he was up to something. Those eyes under her hood were sharp indeed.

“If you're asking whether I doubt them, then yes, I have my suspicions. In school we learned how to prove whether a god exists, so it's easy for me to doubt. And so, hearing about a god's leg being in Lupi several decades ago..”

Cole had failed to complete his studies in the south, but he planned to go back. That's why he remained in this region and had not returned home. What was he going to do now?

It was normal for one to know the legends of their homeland, so it wasn't strange that he would know the same stories Lawrence did. The big difference was that Cole didn't believe in those ridiculous tales. Lawrence didn't look at Holo, but he did hold her hand tightly as he spoke.

“So-called treasure maps are found *after* a treasure is stolen, you know.”

Cole's eyes opened wide. Gradually they returned to normal and he smiled in embarrassment. It was as if he was declaring to them that he would never be tricked again. Lawrence continued.

“But it's ridiculous. No one could ever sell a god's paw for much.”

“...”

Holo gasped. So Cole *did* hear the same things Lawrence had. Holo's hand gripped his even

more tightly. She didn't say anything, but she turned to look at him. Cole understood what Lawrence meant.

“Right.. because there are too many fake artifacts out there..”

There was a rumor in Lisco that a company was searching for the bones of a wolf god. If Lacoza was able to say that while drunk, then this rumor must be widespread among the boatmen. If Cole had heard it while traveling then it was surely common knowledge even in inns and pubs.

Without wind there were no waves. And in the north, where pagan beliefs were common, these kinds of rumors were popular. During his seven years as a traveling merchant, Lawrence heard of many such relics. Sainly remains. The feathers of angels. The miraculous Holy Grail. The robes of light worn by God. No matter which it was, it was an obvious fake that would only make people laugh.

Cole hastily opened his mouth to keep the conversation going. He probably thought Lawrence and Holo were quiet because they were shocked to hear about the god's paw.

“Uh.. but I *would* prove it was real if I could..”

He hung his head and wore a lonely smile, like a child who realized that achievements required talent. If he now learned that Holo was the same kind of god, how would he react? It would be interesting to find out. Lawrence wondered if Holo would reveal her true identity to Cole, but she didn't.. she actually just calmly looked at the boy.

“But why would the Church look for the remains of another god?”

Lawrence spoke while keeping an eye on Holo's reactions. They might get some useful information if they continued, so he tried to keep the conversation going.

“Why?”

“I mean, if the Church was searching for those remains as if they were real, wouldn't that be like they were admitting the existence of another god? The Church surely wouldn't do that, would they?”

Cole was astonished, and whispered “that's right” to himself before answering.

“When you put it that way, it really *is* strange..”

If the god of Lupi was real, they should be like Holo.. an enormous wolf. His memories were still hazy, but Lawrence remembered that Lacoza had mentioned “the bones of hell's guard dog.”

If the Church found these bones, were they going to use them to spread their own religion? They could declare them as the bones of a saint who died for their religion, or use them some other way. Just as Lawrence considered this, Cole shouted out.

“Ah! Maybe they're-”

Lawrence was watching him intently, wondering what he realized, but at that moment the people around the fire broke into laughter over something.

Suddenly he heard a snapping noise. Had Holo finally snapped? He turned, expecting there to be a look of displeasure on her face, but she was just as surprised as he was. As their eyes met, she seemed to realize what he suspected, which earned him a punch to the shoulder.

“What was *that*?”

Cole may have doubted the existence of gods, but he asked this with the softness and fear of a true believer.

Holo seemed to finally be in a better mood. Maybe it was because she came to realize that people's beliefs didn't fade as easily as she thought.

After the snapping noise, it was quiet for a while. The people around the fire sat back down and shrugged at Lawrence in confusion. What had happened? Everyone who was awake was curious. And then suddenly, the same noise repeated several times, followed by another loud sound - it was coming from the river.

Everyone seemed to realize it at the same time. It was the sound of wood pressing against other wood, and the sound of an enormous bubble bursting. Cole sprang to his feet. Lawrence knelt on one knee and peered into the darkness.

“The boats!”

The men around the fire shouted, and everyone looked at the river. Two boats were drifting away under the moonlight.

“Hey! Someone do something!”

They were all standing and shouting, but none of them made a move.. they were merchants and travelers, after all. Lawrence stood. Cole ran toward the river without thinking, but stopped after a few paces. They all knew they had to do *something*, they just didn't know what.

“Save the boats!”

After someone shouted this, all the boatman - who were asleep like a big pile of cow dung - seemed to spring to life. Maybe they were used to this sort of thing. Some of them were stumbling from the drink, but they all positively flew toward the river.

Lacoza and one of his friends were the first to arrive. They pulled the moving boats with bull-like strength. Lacoza leaped onto one, and his friend followed suit, barely making it. The others who were sober enough then took the next best option.. they jumped into the water and swam to them.

The boats near the sunken ship had started to slide along with the current. Perhaps it was because they had tried to pull the sunken ship ashore.. maybe the ropes holding it down had weakened, and finally snapped under the weight of the boats.

If they floated away, the boats might capsize or hit a shallow part of the river and sink. That, and there were bound to be other boats stopped along the riverside for the night.. even a child could see the consequences if they collided.

Thankfully the boatmen were like battle-hardened knights – they didn't even hesitate to jump into the freezing water. They didn't do it for themselves, they did it for all of their reputations. The fame of each of them would be harmed if more boats sank.

Cole took several steps forward, maybe in admiration of their courage. Lawrence swallowed hard. He was anxious, and watched the scene unfold with undivided attention. One of the boats was a large one that needed four or five oarsmen to control.. it wasn't going to be easy to stop. He didn't feel it was right for him to sit around like the others. Holo whispered in his ear.

“Do you truly not understand?”

“Eh?”

Was she talking about the current situation? He was so focused on it that it took him a moment

to realize that she couldn't be. Then it hit him. She was talking about why the Church would be looking for the bones of the wolf god.

“Oh, you understand?”

There was another shout. Lawrence raised his head and saw the boat Lacoza had boarded his own boat and rowed ahead of the other one. Another boatman hopped aboard the large boat and started to row hard. But there was no sign of it slowing down. Under the moonlight, the oars looked like flimsy branches crying out for help. They could hear Lacoza's surprisingly-loud voice booming in the dark.

“I do not. But just as you get drunk on talk of trade, I get drunk on people's beliefs.”

Her words were sharp.. she was in a foul temper. He didn't know why. He just knew it must be related to the Church.

“I despise being called a god, because everyone always flees from me with fear in their eyes. They cower, are amazed by my presence, and pray. They respect me, yet reject me. So, you, think in the opposite-”

“Stop! That's too dangerous!”

Someone bellowed. Lacoza's boat had jumped it in front of the big ship. It seemed he planned on trying to use it to stop that ship, but it might just end up with him sinking. There was a crashing noise, and everyone gasped and clenched their fists. Lacoza's boat shook violently.. would it capsize?

The atmosphere was tense on the riverbank. Lawrence looked over at Holo. He knew what she had wanted to say.

“Were they planning to-”

There was the loud noise of a wave splashing. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the big ship decelerated, then almost stopped entirely. The atmosphere relaxed, and several cheers were heard. Lacoza stood up on his boat, waving his hands happily.

But Lawrence was unable to share in the joy.. what the Church must be planning made him feel sick to his stomach.

“Exactly. If they find the real bones and step on them, then what? Even my kind cannot kill after we become bones.. we can only be trodden upon. There would be no miracles. And what would people seeing this conclude?”

In the blink of a eye, several other boats had reached the ship. Several boatmen hopped aboard and began throwing ropes to each other. Their cooperation was impressive.. it proved how united people were after sharing in the same work for so many years. If Lawrence could, he would like to join in and share in their enthusiasm.

“What they worship is something even I would call a god.”

Such a method would be far more effective than trying to up-sell their own God with mere words. Only the Church was so competitive that they would stoop to something like this.

But it was possible that those bones belonged to a friend or relative of Holo. She had told Lawrence that she could understand the fur and leather trades, but hunting out of need was entirely different from smashing bones into dust. Her eyes were trembling, but she wasn't crying.. it was wrath.

“And what do you think?”

She asked her question. While whistling and clapping, the boatmen skillfully tied the boats down. They worked quickly, as if it was perfectly natural. And to the Church, placing faith above all else was completely natural. To make others believe in their god, they would sink to any level.

“It's just too cruel..”

“Stupid! Say no more.”

She stomped on his foot.. the pain he felt proved just how angry she was.

“I did *not* ask whether it was right or wrong. But because you think similarly to the Church-”

Holo stopped short. She didn't even have time to apologize, because this time Lawrence stomped on her foot and stared at her fiercely. His expression made it clear that it was payback for such an insult. She bit her lip, but whether it was to calm herself or it was out of regret, he couldn't tell. It might very well be both. She continued.

“That came out wrong.. I meant, you can put yourself in their shoes, so how likely is it that they really were searching for the bones?”

“50%”

Perhaps that answer was too curt. She looked at him with a pained expression, worried that she had unintentionally angered him.

“No, I am really half-certain. I wasn't being dismissive. This kind of tactic is similar to how Cole was cheated. It's common.”



He pointed his chin at Cole. The boy, and the others, were watching the activities of the boatman. His naive young back in Holo's robe truly did resemble her.

“Would that not imply that it is more than half-likely?”

“No, I know you better than that. You know how ridiculous rumors can be. It's only half-likely. For there to be a widespread rumor like this implies that a company is spreading it for some reason. But we'll never confirm if it has anything to do with Pinot.. except that if Cole isn't lying, the Church must have visited Pinot.”

Lacosa finished, and the other boatmen jumped into his boat. Actually, some of them were so riled up they jumped into the river and made their way back to the shore. More wood was thrown on the sputtering fire, and warm wine was handed to the heroes.

“Hey, you.”

“Hmm?”

Holo was holding his hand again.. just like every other time she wanted to ask him a favor.

“Let us share a relaxing trip, then bid farewell when we reach Yoitsu.What say you?”

Lawrence laughed in response. She angrily dug her nails into his hand. Her joke was too much, but his laugh was a bit too much as well. He caught his breath and gently replied.

“What say I? What did you tell me when I came back to you?”

Her eyes turned away in silence. Unbelievable.. she was actually embarrassed.

“This could just be a rumor, so we shouldn't get too worked up over it. But I don't mind if you're interested in finding out.”

“And if it is true?”

She was truly a Wisewolf, always knowing what to say to get what she wanted. His response was just as gentle as his first one.

“If it's true, then this time we may suffer more serious burns.”

“From my anger?”

He closed his eyes. When they reopened, Cole was waving at them with a look of excitement. He then sensed the mood and looked away, as if he had just seen something he shouldn't have.

“This kind of thing comes with a very large risk, because the Church is gambling with its reputation. Therefore-”

He looked at Holo. Cole was peeping at them, but they didn't care.

“-it's not just a simple matter of belief. It is tied to the Churches' prestige. Those bones would have a high value. If we get caught up in this, our burns could be even worse than the ones from your anger.”

She smiled, then raised her free hand in front of her chest to wave back at Cole. He hastily turned his head away again. She then slowly lowered that hand.

“In all honesty, we are talking about mere bones. There is no need to take a risk over such things.”

She was being entirely transparent. Lawrence also raised his free hand in front of his chest, but he did so not to wave, but to poke her forehead.

“Even so, I would prefer to write a thicker book.”

“...really?”

He could count his life a good one if he lived long enough to die of old age.. but it would be far more satisfying if he had been through an exciting adventure. He could finally understand why people gathered to revel in harvest festivals each year.

“A story needs a good ending, right?”

“Even if you are placed in danger.”

He shook his head. He wasn't young anymore. He had a life he wanted to live.

“Of course, we should try to avoid danger.”

A proud smile spread across her face.

“I am the Wisewolf of Yoitsu.”

Lawrence knew it was a ridiculous decision to make. If the bones were sought-after, and the Church was involved, then what could one traveling merchant do to stop them?

But he still felt that it wouldn't be right to simply have a relaxed and safe journey with Holo. A good stew needed thick pieces of beef with *lots* of spice.

Holo's smile settled. She walked ahead and poked Cole in the forehead for eavesdropping, then began pushing him toward Lacoza. Lawrence slowly followed.

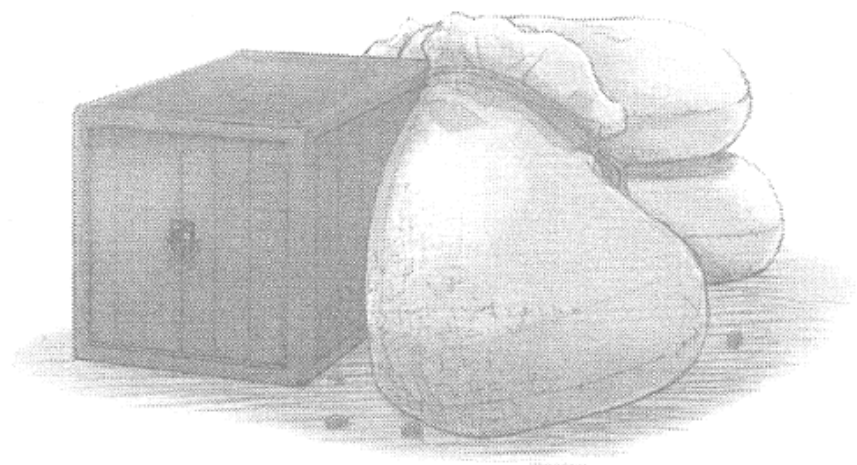
The moon hung in the sky. The cold air was wavering from the laughter of the boatmen. It was a beautiful night in their journey together.

Lawrence breathed in deeply. He wasn't interested in finding out about the bones, but telling her so would only make her angry. It was just that he had other important things to worry about.

“...”

He finally had a reason to walk forward with her, standing at her side. He couldn't resist silently thanking the moon.

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## Epilogue

The moment day broke, Lawrence's face was covered in sunlight. Everyone would already be awake.. or so he anticipated. In truth, when he opened his eyes he found that he was also covered by Holo.

She habitually slept under the covers, only sometimes popping her head out for fresh air. He noticed her face was a bit sweaty, so she probably had been curled under the blanket not long ago. Her face looked like dough ready to be baked. Surely it would soon rise.

But her expression was entirely without anxiety. Perhaps he was thinking too much. In fact, her face was beyond calm. It seemed confident enough to say “my dreams shall only be sweet.” Even her singed bits of hair were like medals granted to a heroic knight who had jumped from a burning castle. Well, perhaps that was going too far..

He smiled and yawned. The cold, dry skin on his face cracked like a thin blanket of ice. The pain woke him up completely. It was quite sunny. Holo's face wrinkled, though her eyes remained closed. She curled herself back up under the blanket.

After the endeavor to stop the big ship, Lawrence figured the boatmen would celebrate the entire night away. But it seemed they knew their responsibilities. They understood the danger of boating after spending the whole night drinking, and had only drunk a little before going to sleep.

Their clothes hadn't even dried by the time they lay down to sleep. Fortunately for them, the boat was hauling leather and fur, so they could sleep well without their clothes. But it was something else to see all those men sleeping in the nude in a pile of leather and fur. Holo would surely have said, “I know not the words to describe this”, and Lawrence would have to agree.

It seemed like everyone else was asleep, and he was the only one awake. It was neither because of the cold or the fact that he had napped in the boat the previous day. It was simply his instinct. As he would have said but a few days ago, “treasure every waking second as a chance to do business.” He had missed that feeling.

And that's how he was feeling right now. With morning came new opportunities to trade, and if he worked hard he might even profit. One more silver coin, two more, three more.. always gaining, never losing.. it was intoxicating. And now he felt that way once more.

As the end of their journey neared, he had stopped wanting to move forward. Would he stop looking forward to the dawn entirely? He knew that every meeting ended in a farewell, but he had grown to hate the thought. Even Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, couldn't stop this inevitability.

But now Lawrence, a normal human being, had found a way to shake this oppressive feeling. It had been a while since he woke up so early, and he knew why. He had found a reason to continue moving forward.

In Lenos he had decided that to smile at the end of their journey, and they had discovered where their destination was. And just yesterday, he chose the path they would take to get there.

“Let us share a relaxing trip, then bid farewell when we reach Yoitsu. What say you?”

Holo had asked him this, but it was impossible for a greedy merchant and a malicious wolf to share a relaxing trip.

Lawrence was as giddy as a young child. He didn't know what would happen. Plus, if what they heard was the truth it would be a painful experience for Holo. And it was quite possibly true. But Lawrence didn't believe he was making a reckless choice, because-

His thoughts were interrupted by a sneeze heard from under the blanket. People in an inn had to wait for everyone else to be asleep if they wanted to discuss something in private. Her sneezing, coughing, and swallowing noises made it clear she was now awake.

Lifting the covers, he saw her wiping her nose. She felt the covers moving and raised her head to take a look beyond. But her eyes seemed less cruel than usual.

“Mmm.. it has been a long time since I woke up with so much energy.”

He didn't believe he was making a reckless choice, because she felt the same way he did. She *had* to.

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“Are you sure you really wanna go back?”

After the sun had risen, the other boatmen prepared to resume their journeys. Lacoza was just standing around barking out orders to everyone. It seemed to be his reward for his heroic deed the previous night. It was probably some custom the boatmen shared.

But Lacoza's face, which had "I was *the man* last night!" written all over it, soon became nervous after hearing Lawrence say that he and Holo wanted to return to Lenos.

"Though we were stuck here for a night, we'll be goin' at full speed today.. we'll make up for lost time real quick!"

He anxiously tried to convince them, but Lawrence politely refused.

"No, we've changed our minds about pushing ourselves so hard to go to Gerube. After last night we've chosen to return to Lenos."

"Oh.. that's a pity.. as a boatman I feel terrible, but I can't stop you."

His face looked like Lawrence's would if he lost his wallet.. it made Lawrence feel a bit guilty. In truth they weren't really going back to Lenos. They wanted to reach Gerube before the others. But Lawrence had to lie to him, as the way they would get there first was a secret.

"Hmm.. it'll take us a day to walk back, won't it? Of course, you have our thanks for such an interesting trip."

Lawrence used a diplomatic tone of voice, and Lacoza smiled slightly before sighing. It was a trait common to boatmen that they would cave in without much hesitation.

"Well, alright. All meetings end in farewells. And us boatmen who connect small towns are bound to eventually meet the same merchant again some day."

Lacoza offered his hand after he finished speaking. Boatmen would shake your hand as you boarded their ship, and once more as you departed. Once aboard their ship, you placed your life in their hands and they became your friend.

"You're right, and I'm a traveling merchant.. we're bound to meet again."

Lawrence then turned to Cole.

"And you, Cole Todd! Be sure to remember what I've taught you!"

“Eh? Ah.. yes!”

Lawrence raised his voice at Cole, who stood beside Lacoza, his mind obviously still half-asleep. To make sure the boats didn't float away again, Cole had been asked to watch them for the rest of the night. And, it seemed, he was very eager to earn his keep.

Upon seeing this, Lawrence had felt inspired to secretly pay for Cole's fare on Lacoza's boat.. and to give him a bit extra. He told Lacoza to give the boy that bounty when they arrived at Gerube. It was probably enough for a week of the boy's living expenses.

“And you, Mr. Lacoza..”

“Hmm?”

“Don't you let him escape.”

Hearing Lawrence say that made Lacoza laugh. He still had to win Cole as his apprentice before they arrived at Gerube. Although Cole had his own goals, if Lacoza worked away at him he might successfully manage to convince Cole to stay with him.

It was really none of his business now, but Lawrence hoped the boy would stand his ground.. that's why he intentionally said that. The brave boatman smiled and sighed once more before responding.

“Understood! It's fine, I'm a boatman. We don't cheat.”

Travelers had a destination in mind when they began a journey. Lacoza surely understood this better than anyone. He and Lawrence looked each in the eyes and laughed. It was too early for Lawrence to have an apprentice, but he still felt frustrated at seeing a good fish get away.

“And you..”

Lacoza pulled Lawrence's shoulder closer to his and moved his face in.

“..try not to argue with your companion over such dumb things.”

Lawrence looked over at Holo, who was laughing beneath her cloak. He then looked back at Cole, who had also started laughing. He felt rage welling up inside him.

“Alright! Yes, yes!”

“Listen, love can't be bought, so business skills are useless when it comes to love. Never forget that!”

That was an exaggeration, but a reasonable one.

“I shan't. I shall lock it deep within my heart.”

“That's good then.”

Lacoza finally released Lawrence.

“So, that's that. My job is handling a boat, not convincing people to remain aboard.”

His sad face had indeed been a ruse. It was now replaced with one saying “it's time to move on.” Lawrence couldn't help but praise him in his heart. He truly was an outstanding boatman. Would Lawrence be that strong in ten or fifteen years? He held Holo's hand, who nodded calmly, then bid them farewell.

“Then, I wish you all the best.”

He and Holo turned away.

“Wait!”

Hearing Cole's shout, they turned back.

“Hmm?”

“Let me be your apprentice!” - if Cole said that, Lawrence would have trouble walking away. It looked like Cole wasn't sure what he should say. He closed his mouth, and after a few moments he uttered a few short words.

“Thank you for helping me.”

When he first spotted Lawrence, Cole had called him “master”. Now, his gratitude felt like he really did consider himself Lawrence's apprentice.

“Be sure to work hard.”

Lawrence replied briefly, then turned away. He wanted to turn back to take another look. His brain kept struggling with that, but ultimately he didn't turn around. There was no need to ask why he felt this way.. even Holo wanted to turn back and look at Cole again.

“So, after we have followed this river to that port town, what shall we do?”

Holo didn't look at him. She just unnaturally brought up this new topic.

“Um.. well, we'll catch Eve in Gerube.”

That was what they had decided last night. Why was there a reason to repeat it? Did she just want to forcefully change the topic?

“We shall catch that fox, take back your money, and have her tell us everything she knows, correct?”

“Eve's worked with the Church for years. She should have dirt on all of the towns along this river.”

“Then it shall be fine to exact revenge however I see fit.”

She wasn't kidding. Lawrence smiled as he reminded himself to never get into a serious dispute with Holo.

“However, you, running as a wolf under the sun will be so pleasant.. I wonder how much faster I can run compared to a boat.”

That was the reason they left Lacoza behind. A boat would simply not be fast enough to catch Eve now, and finding riding horses would be a challenge. So they had chosen this option.

“And then, after we have destroyed the nest of that company, and walked along the river back to Lenos, what shall we do?”

Lawrence remained silent for several seconds before he finally looked back at Holo and answered.

“Let's figure that out when we get there.”

Holo frowned. But it wasn't something they could plan so far ahead. He smiled and spoke his mind.

“So antagonistic..”

“What did you say?!”

She even replied with antagonism. It seemed she wanted to keep up her tough act. Lawrence wanted to tell her that he would never be cheated again, but knew better than to do so. Instead he changed the conversation.

“You know, the look on your face said you wanted to bring Cole with us.”

She puffed out her lips, then sighed.

“Hmph. I was afraid you would be lonely after I left, so I wanted to find another partner for you. Since that has proven useless, I will not bother trying it again.”

Her words were cold as ice, as if she was reciting a tongue twister. They were so devoid of feeling that there was no room for interpretation. But Lawrence didn't reply.. he just kept staring at her. He knew how she really felt. As he expected, she proved unable to withstand his gaze.

“I cannot underestimate you.”

Her expression didn't change, but this was good enough for him. She was no longer acting tough.

“I cannot remember how long ago.. but once as I traveled, I came across a boy and girl like him”

“Ho-”

“They could not tell right from left. It was too dangerous to leave them on their own, so I temporarily cared for them as we traveled. It was interesting.. seeing him reminded me of those times.”

That should be part of the truth, but not the whole story.

“Another reason is that I like children like him.”

So that was her other reason.

“Is that acceptable?”

She shot him a stare, as if to ask him if his own stare was one of jealousy. But he would never admit that. He shrugged.

“If that's true, why didn't you ask him to come along with us?”

“Of course he could not join us.”

“That's true.”

After all they were heading into a dangerous situation. Another reason was obviously because hiding Holo's secret would be too challenging if they traveled together. And her final reason-

“And what was my final reason?”

This time Holo was asking him to answer. She would probably bite his throat if he didn't comply.

“Because it's best when it's just the two of us.”

He said this without any hint of embarrassment or antagonism, and so she didn't laugh at him. Practicing too much would make things less fun.. and it was too early to start thinking about that at any rate. Holo simply held his hand, letting her facial expression answer, “precisely.”

“You have always understood that. However..”

“However?”

“When we met the boy you told me that if he asked for our help, we would help him, and if he did not, we would not. And so, if he desired to follow us, we would take him.. otherwise not.”

Lawrence wasn't sure how to reply. He remembered the look on Cole's face. Had he wanted to ask them to take him with them?

Surely he knew they had a reason to discuss the bones. And if they were real, he should be interested as well, having been born near Yoitsu. If someone else also wanted to find them, he would want to join them.. that was only natural.

But Cole hesitated because he wanted to return to school. And Lawrence supported that decision.

“Still, if he just asked us to take him with us, I'd have refused.”

“Huh?”

He was contradicting himself. Holo's stared at him with quiet accusation. But being too welcoming might not be a good thing.

“On the other hand, if he said something like he'd kill himself for refusing to take him, I'd reconsider.”

“Are you saying that if he is not motivated enough, he should not impose on our little date?”

There was a moment of silence before Lawrence replied.

“Hmm, yes, that's right.”

“What was that silence?”

“Nothing.”

Despite their verbal sparring, their hands were still clasped as they walked. From Lawrence's point of view, she was leaning up against him.. whether that's how she saw it was anyone's guess.

“Alright.. we can probably speed things up.”

They looked behind them. Lacoza, Cole, and the others were out of sight. There was only the Roam river flowing slowly past them. If they walked a bit to the north they'd be in a wilderness and Holo could change into her wolf form without any risk. He strengthened his grip on her hand and began walking northward. But as he did-

“What's the matter?”

Holo had stopped. He thought she might have been debating something in her mind, but she was looking downstream with a surprised look on her face.

“Who's there?”

He actually suspected who it was.. he even kind of looked forward to it. He didn't know the paths around towns very well, but there shouldn't be anyone on a path in the middle of nowhere. And yet, a small figure was running toward them. Holo didn't move. She just stared. Lawrence glanced at her face, smiled, and sighed.

“So you really *do* like kids.”

Her ears twitched violently. He was surprised to see her react as if he had said something wrong. He didn't think he had, but he never got an answer. Holo didn't turn to him, she just spoke.

“Hey, you.. what were you going to say if I just answered yes?”

How unexpected.

“What?”

He reflexively released her hand, but she wouldn't let him escape. Her hand caught his like a cat grabbing a butterfly. She issued a challenging smile from under her hood.

“Yes, I do love children. And so?”

“Uh..”

How careless of him.. had she figured out what he was thinking? She just waved her tail happily, but he had no excuse to cover himself.. all he could do was force a change of subject. But before he could regain his bearings, she continued her offensive.

“However, I am just a girl who is traveling with you. I shall leave the boy in your care.”

She then let him go, leaving him very uncomfortable. It was obvious who “the boy” was.. he was the one sprinting towards them, Cole. It didn't look like he was just returning something

they had forgotten.

Lawrence coughed, trying to put that embarrassing moment behind them. Holo was laughing at him, so he figured he was in the clear now, and that she wouldn't continue her assault.

“But if he's in my care, then you won't be able to change into your wolf form..”

She heaved a great sigh.

“You men always think you are the only ones who are special.”

“...”

“Think about it. Where was he born? Still, I can only gamble on whether he will fear me.”

Lawrence didn't have the heart to continue after he saw the grim look on her face. Even though Cole probably wouldn't run to the Church screaming “it's the devil!”, he might fall to his knees in reverence, given his heritage. That would wound Holo severely, so Lawrence replied gently.

“Let's first hear his reasons.”

Holo nodded.

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Lawrence could finally hear Cole's footsteps and panting. It looked like he was running for his life. He stopped when he had reached speaking distance. He was shivering and his face was covered in dirt, but he did not approach any closer.

Lawrence remained silent.. if Cole was going to beg, he first had to knock on the door.

“Um...”

He passed the first trial. He was panting so hard he could only barely manage that much.

“Have we forgotten something?”

Lawrence intentionally feigned ignorance. Cole bit his lips, apparently anticipating Lawrence's rejection. Children usually expected their elders to help, but it looked like he passed the second

trial. He shook his head.

“I'd like to ask a favor of you.”

Holo shifted under her hood, possibly trying to keep her face hidden. If she liked Cole beyond just wanting him to be Lawrence's apprentice, she would have a tough time keeping calm as he was tested like this. But Cole had passed the third trial. He knew how unlikely it was to be accepted but he still made the request. He had shown courage.

“How so? I've not the money to do you any favors.”

Lawrence continued his act, but Cole kept looking at him. Lawrence was quite close to simply saying “come on, let's go”. If they were only going on a simple business trip, he would have already done so.

“No, no.. um.. I..”

“You.. what?”

Lawrence pushed back. Cole stared at the ground and clenched his fists, then raised his eyes again.

“Mr. Lawrence, you're going to Lupi to confirm the legend of the wolf god, right? Please take me with you.. please!”

As he begged he stepped forward. He always acted with conviction.. his strong stance made it all the more difficult for Lawrence to avoid pressuring him to become his apprentice. Lawrence really wanted the boy to accomplish his original goals. It was also the most important reason he wasn't sure if the boy should go along with them.. after all, they were out to confirm a dangerous rumor.

“There may not be any money in it.”

Lawrence chose his first words carefully.

“And it could be dangerous. Not to mention it's just a rumor – it's quite likely made up.”

“That's alright.. I'm fine if it is. And I already expected it would be dangerous.. I'd probably have died beside this river if you wouldn't of helped me.”

Cole swallowed hard. He must be thirsty after running so hard on such a cold, dry day. Lawrence suspected that was why he was setting down the ragged bag he carried with him. But he soon realized just how wrong he was.

“I’ll give you back your money. And also..”

What Cole pulled out his bag was too shocking. His hands held it very tightly.

“Y- you..”

Lawrence couldn’t find the words to respond. Cole’s face looked as if it were torn between shedding tears of joy and regret.

“..I can’t go back to Mr. Lacoza now.”

He was holding a bright copper coin.. one of the new Ainee coins. He had just burned the bridge behind him. He stared at Lawrence, who had let go of Holo’s hand to scratch his head. He had no reason to reject Cole if the boy was *this* determined. Now there was no way he could say no.

Cole had wandered to this region after being expelled from his school in the south, where he had gone because he had an important goal. So Lawrence knew that Cole was acting with sincerity. He took a look at Holo, who was already looking at him as if to say, “is this trial over yet?”

“Alright, alright..”

Lawrence felt like he had dug his own grave. Cole’s face changed to a look of relief. He raised his hand to his chest and hunched his body up slightly, as if he had just finished walking a tightrope.

“However-”

Lawrence’s words seemed to startle him.

“If you wish to travel with me, there is something you must know.”

He said this quite deliberately. He really did hope that Cole would go with them. After all, the boy had even eagerly watched the boats in order to get the chance to steal that coin.

“Oh? Uh.. huh?”

Holo's eyes darted around. Then she effortlessly unclasped her belt. She sure looked happy. Lawrence had no reason to suspect Cole. Holo *did* know what people were thinking, so she probably guessed how Cole would react.

The boy didn't know why she was taking off her clothes. His body froze in place. Lawrence walked up to him and poked his shoulder firmly until the boy turned away. The sound of shuffling clothing left his face in chaos, and he kept his eyes glued to Lawrence's face.

“Such an innocent little thing”, Lawrence thought. But Lawrence knew he was just as innocent in Holo's eyes, so his emotions were all in a jumble.

“Ah-choo~”

Holo sneezed. It turned out that she had won her gamble.

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The only way to describe Cole was “screaming loudly”. In fact he had been incredibly loud, but it wasn't quite the same as a little boy panicking out of fear. After Holo licked his face with her enormous tongue, he fell to the floor. Lawrence then finally found the words to describe his reaction; it was the reaction of a boy who had just met the legendary hero in his heart.. that was it.

“You seem quite displeased.”

Lawrence had reacted with shock and stepped away from Holo when he first saw her wolf form. He had no right to say anything, no matter how many times she poked his head with her nose. After calming down, Cole had asked Holo to do him a favor. She obliged.

“That tickles! Have you not had enough?”

She swished her tail and Cole came back to her front. Surprisingly, his first sentence after calming down had been “please let me touch your tail!” Holo seemed to delight in teasing him, flicking her tail away as he tried to grab it.

“Alright, it seems like we're destined to travel together..”

Lawrence had just finished gathering Holo's clothing and packing their luggage. Cole turned to him and reacted with joy.

“Then you're taking me?!”

He seemed to have already forgotten his original goal after seeing a god in the flesh.

“This wolf is something that cannot be seen by the Church. We can hardly let one of their students learn of her and just walk away free.”

Lawrence said this playfully as he ruffled the hair on Cole's head.

“That, and you *did* go overboard and steal that coin..”

“...”

“Well?”

“Well.. um.. I actually *did* plan to steal one. It would be easy to say that the number of coins in

the box was wrong.”

Lawrence remembered the picture of coins Cole had been drawing. He had probably figured out the riddle of the coins.

“They asked me to watch the boats, and I knew that you wouldn't take me with you.. but Mr. Lacoza was just too nice. I felt bad about stealing from him, so I talked to him. I told him I wanted to go with you, and that I hoped I could pay my fee by solving the riddle of the coins.”

Lacoza's complication expression flashed through Lawrence's imagination.

“Then, that coin..”

“Mr. Lacoza gave it to me. But it wasn't one from the crates.. he took it out of his pocket and gave it to me as a parting gift. And-”

“He told you to act as though you had stolen it, and could never return. Is that it?”

After Holo said that, Cole smiled apologetically.

“Yes.”

Lacoza really did like the boy.. he even came up with this scheme for him. It was amusing that Lawrence had very nearly told him that he should go with Lacoza if he had no intention on returning to school

“Alright, that is that. Anyhow, let us leave. Someone else is heading down this path.”

If Holo was seen by a stranger it would be a big problem, so Lawrence and Cole readied themselves. At Holo's urging, Cole would first climb on her back. But before he could do so, Lawrence spoke.

“There's also something I must ask you.”

Lawrence was being entirely serious.

“Before we started walking down the river, what did this wolf whisper into your ears?”

He knew Cole wouldn't answer, but he wanted to make their relationships clear. So he spoke it

like a threat, as if telling the boy “if you don't tell me, you can forget about traveling with me.” Cole's mouth was shut, per Holo's request. He gave her a look of concern, as if asking permission.

“Should you dare to say it aloud, I cannot guarantee my own teeth will stay silent.”

She was baring her teeth, but it was definitely a smile. Cole's eyes narrowed and glimmered. Lawrence could tell they were looking for the hidden meaning behind her words. They were spotted quickly. He smiled and nodded.

“Sorry, I can't tell you.”

His answer made it clear that he was totally under her control.

“Come now, quickly get on my back.”

Cole looked sheepishly at the ground, as if to apologize to Lawrence. He then climbed onto her back. Lawrence scratched his head and sighed at their mutual complicity.

“So, what did you tell him?”

It was incredible that a wolf's face could show such emotion. A mischievous smile loomed on that face, words somehow escaping through the gaps between her teeth.

“Nothing.”

Lawrence shrugged and began to climb onto her back. He fully expected that if Cole joined them, they would often team up on him like this. But if you asked Lawrence whether he hated it, he would only shrug.

“Oh, and one other thing.”

Cole didn't seem to expect another question. Lawrence hopped onto her back and asked his question.

“What's your answer to the riddle of those coins?”

“Um..”

Cole almost answered, but at that moment Holo rose to her feet.

“You can quietly think about that to yourselves.”

“What? You figured it out too?”

Lawrence couldn't believe his ears. Holo tilted her head to look at him on her back, and flicked her ears.

“No. But there is something I am certain of.”

She started off slowly, as if getting used to her body once again. Then, she accelerated. Her passengers had to lower their faces into her fur, or the wind would freeze them.. that's how quickly she ran.

“So, thinking about that riddle is more interesting than talking to me?”

That really made Lawrence mad. She accelerated very sharply. It was clearly intentional. He was furious. He could only tightly grasp her fur and keep his head down. Cole was pressed between him and Holo, so he could clearly hear the boy's giggles.

The view flying past them was all a blur. The wind was cold as ice. But Lawrence smiled in the face of that bitter wind, because he felt warmth in his heart.

A trio united unexpectedly. He knew what this situation mimicked, but he wouldn't dare say it out loud. Never. He might write it in the book detailing their travels, if he really did end up writing such a book. He would sneak it into the thick volume in secret.. it *was* a sentence that he would have to write down.

Three people embarked on an adventure, just like it was practice for the real deal. But Lawrence wouldn't say what it was practice for, not in the main story. He hid his smile so Holo wouldn't notice. Because the path to their destination was now illuminated by hope.

