



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*

Volume 9

狼と香辛料

Spice and Wolf

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Merchant
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spicy wolf.

支倉凍砂
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狼と香辛料

対立の町〈下〉

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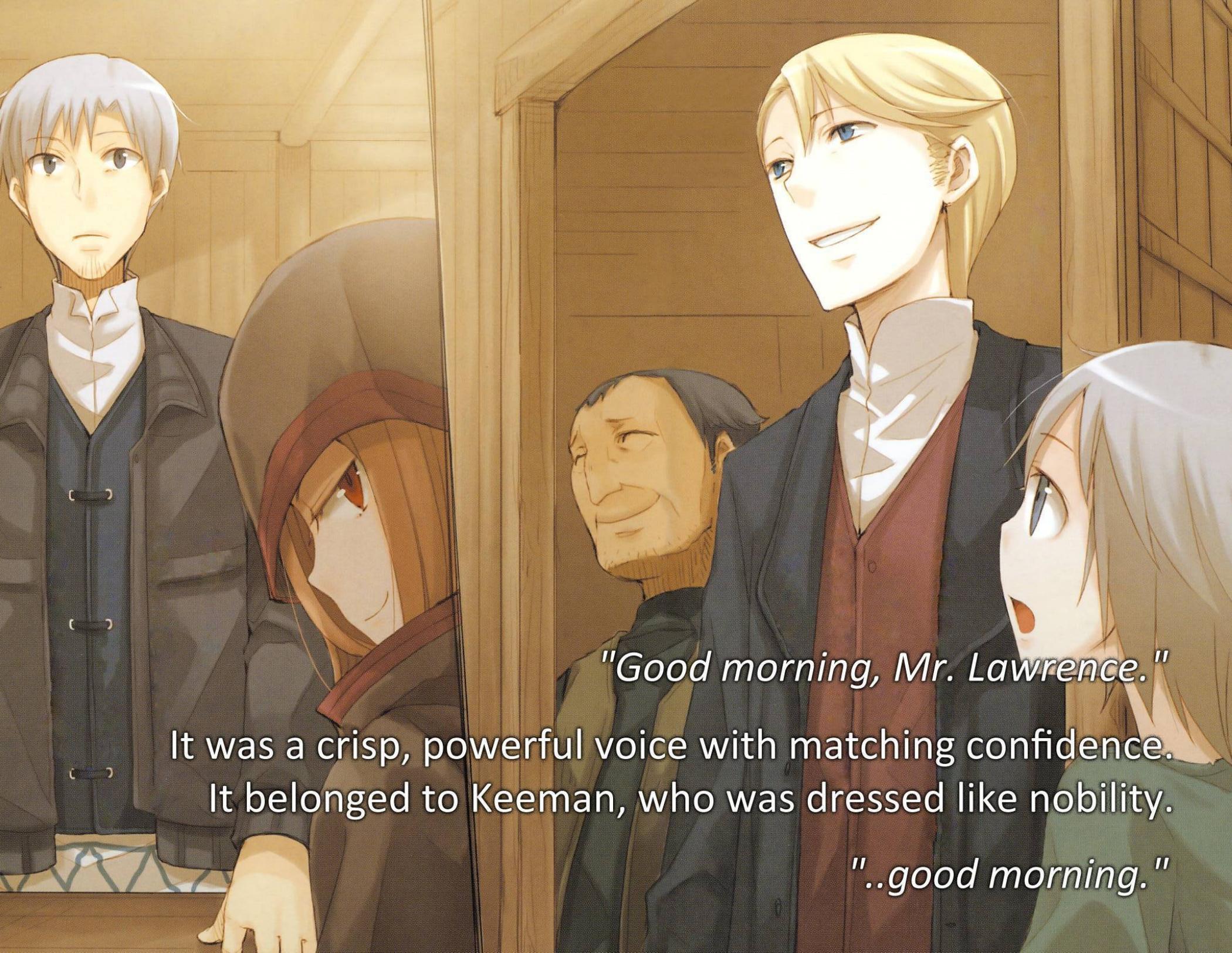
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"Good morning, Mr. Lawrence."

It was a crisp, powerful voice with matching confidence.
It belonged to Keeman, who was dressed like nobility.

"..good morning."



"Do you truly understand?"

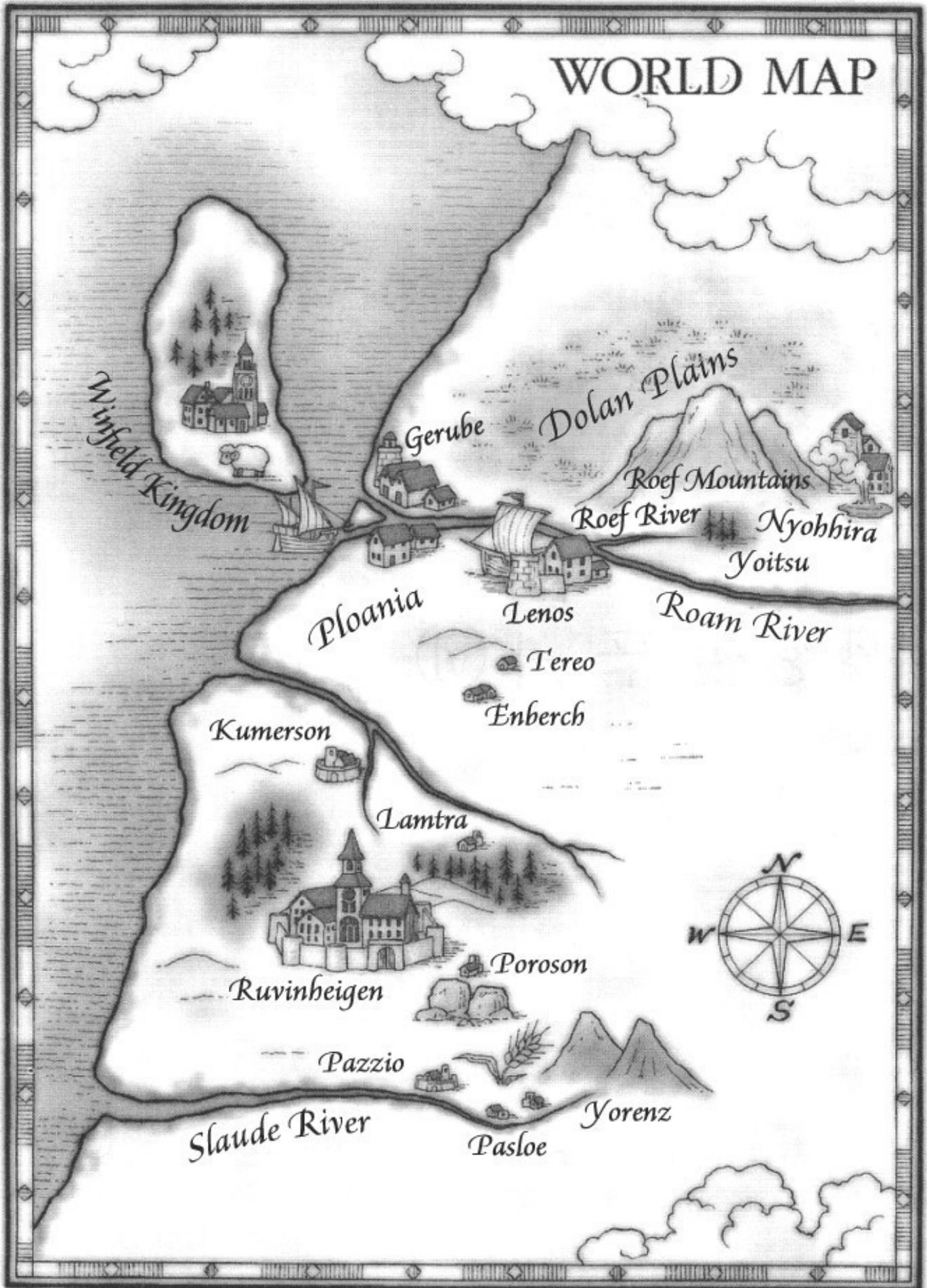
"I believe so."

"Truly?"



"You're really aren't suited to be a merchant."

"Likewise, you're not suited to be a wolf"



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

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対立の町〈下〉

Spice and Wolf

Volume 9 – Town of Confrontation II

*Translation & Editing by
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

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Volume 8 Summary

Gerube is a city divided in two by a river and delta. The wealthy delta, an important marketplace hub, belongs to northern landowners. However, it was built using money loaned by southern merchants, which has left the landowners paying steep monthly interest to this day.

The Narwhale is a mythical sea-monster, with a horn that has miraculous healing and life-extending powers. Its discovery and subsequent presence in Gerube could destroy the delicate balance of power in the city.

Lawrence, Holo and Cole travel to Gerube hunting for information about the bones of another wolf-god. With the help of a letter of introduction from Eve Boland they find clues at D'Jean Company, reputed to be an ally of the famous Diva Company. However, Reynolds, the owner of the company, dismisses the bones as superstitious nonsense.

Lawrence later bumps into Eve, and learns of the situation in Gerube and the delta. Reynolds has profited handsomely from the northern landowners, and still seems to be searching for the wolf-god's bones. But after visiting Keeman, the local branch-manager of the Rowen Trading Guild, Lawrence is unsure who he can trust.

In the meantime a rumor spreads through Gerube that the Narwhale has been caught. When Eve attempts to talk Lawrence into helping her snatch the Narwhale from the northern landowners, he's left at a loss for what to do. As if that wasn't enough, he then receives a letter from Keeman..

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Prologue

Humans are fragile. They have no fangs, claws, or wings with which to flee. They can only protect themselves with their wits. Strategy, skill, and the like.

All creatures, however, have a common way to protect themselves: in numbers.

One goat is weak. But a thousand can band together to fend off wolves. In numbers, animals find strength. They are able to survive and reproduce.

Humans are the same, to a certain extent. They live together and form groups. These groups might be villages, towns or cities. They let humans avoid living in dark places like forests.

But in reality, different groups have disputes. Groups are formed to protect their own members. Outsiders are often seen as enemies.

Such groups are like a strong beast, and will not tolerate challenges from weaker ones. A strong beast can hunt whatever it wishes to eat. Even a bird singing it a love song.

Humans are too fragile. In a world where their gods remain hidden from view, they cannot survive on their own. So to defend themselves, they become a kind of beast living behind stone walls.

They will become locked into groups where betrayal is not tolerated.

Such bonds are the only way to survive the harsh realities of the world. It is like being chained by blood.

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Chapter 4

“Let's go.”

Lawrence was blunt.

“We have to leave as quickly as possible.”

He had entered the room and walked up to the table. On it were several coins they had used to work out the scheme of the D'Jean Company. He poured them into a bag as if wiping sand off the table.

Travelers were accustomed to leaving behind unnecessary items. All that they needed was already packed into bags in one corner of the room. If they had to run, they could simply grab those bags. It was a habit born from the fact that it was common to be attacked while asleep.

“Hey.”

Lawrence raised his head to face his questioner. He was greeted by the surprised face of Holo, his traveling companion.

“What is this?”

In her hands was a letter, undecorated except for one short paragraph and a blood-like stamp in one corner. Lawrence was of course the recipient, and the sender was the Rowen Trading Guild. Many prominent merchants in this guild had backgrounds similar to his, making it the most suitable guild for him to join.

What that stamp represented was the most effective protection for him in any city; it was a mighty weapon. His guild had sent him the letter, all the way to the north end of Gerube.

“We now seek brave merchants, afraid neither of witches nor alchemists. They must be invested in the interests of our guild, or at least in thoughts toward our future growth. Signed, Lud Keeman.”

Holo smoothly read the letter aloud before tilting her head toward Lawrence. Cole, their other companion, then glanced at the letter in her hands.

It was clear what the letter meant. As Eve had surmised, Keeman was seeking Lawrence's aid. It was beyond doubt. Keeman was hoping to give Eve the Narwhale in exchange for land ownership rights in the northern end of the city. The Narwhale held that kind of great value.

But there was a stumbling block - the lack of trust between Keeman and Eve. For them to

cooperate would require a middleman.. and such a middleman needed be someone completely in their control.

In the face of competition over large-scale profits, the value of an individual merchant was comparable to a grain of wheat. Lawrence could practically hear their voices trying to manipulate him. Unlike the calm faces of Holo and Cole, he was intensely anxious.

“Don't you see? My guild is calling me.”

He spoke as he tied up their bags.

“Your guild?”

Upon hearing Holo's reply, he stood up and shook his head.

“Lud Keeman's the manager of the Gerube branch of the Rowen Trading Guild. I'm not being directly called by name, but he's the manager of the guild I belong to. You see? He's grasping my reins through the guild in order to summon me.”

Traveling merchants were feeble. They had no trading rights, nor any true power, so they joined guilds in order to survive. Guilds held trading rights in any city where they had a branch, so merchants could focus on their trading.

But these privileges came at the cost of freedom. A merchant would have to obey the guilds they belonged to since, from another angle, the trading rights they enjoyed came from the efforts of their guildmates. But there was of course a limit to the freedom one could afford to yield.

In seeking a boost to his career, Keeman was involving Lawrence in this scheme. He could frame it as being in the best interests of the guild, meaning that Lawrence had no way to refuse.. he would be seen as a betrayer.

Lawrence was also nervous for another reason – the person he had met with just minutes ago. Keeman was the leader of many individual merchants, but his enemy was a wolf capable of fighting such a giant. That wolf had just asked Lawrence to betray his guild. With the promises of rich reward, of course.

In fact, simply asking him might have been part of her plan. The city had become a hurricane of money. Little merchants like him could hardly escape from the eye of that storm. To the gears of power, the blood of a human was worthless.

“We must leave. As soon as possible. Before it becomes impossible to escape.”

There was still time. Lawrence felt like praying in his heart. He nervously continued.

“Come now, hurry up-”

“Hey, calm down, will you?”

Those cool words splashed onto the fire in his mind, like a bowl of water poured into boiling oil. He instinctively lashed out.

“Calm down? Me?!”

Cole, who was sitting next to Holo and holding a bottle of wine, recoiled from his shout. Holo simply straightened the hair on her ears. It was clear who needed to calm down.

“..”

Setting down their luggage, he forced himself to breathe in deeply and stare at the ceiling. When he had nearly fallen into bankruptcy he had slapped away Holo's hand. He cursed himself for not having learned his lesson.

“Well, those aloof males who react to every twig snapping are fine, but they are not trustworthy. At least you are predictable.”

Holo wagged her tail while petting Cole.

“Most creatures have two eyes but can only see one thing at a time. Do you know why males and females bond?”

Holo grabbed the bottle from Cole and bit off its cork. She then pointed her chin at the boy, as if ordering him to remove the cork from between her teeth. Cole obliged, seemingly already used to this kind of behavior, as she gazed at Lawrence.

“Do you feel that everyone should follow your 'common sense'?”

Her words were simple, but Lawrence knew what was hidden in the second half of her sentence. She and Cole stared at him with a fragile look in their eyes, and made him feel like the lowest kind of villain.

“I often saw such behavior in the village from within the wheat.”

He took her meaning. A moment later Cole followed suit and turned his face away. She poked his side in response, urging him to speak.

“..well, um, my father sometimes lost control like that..”

“Oh? Really?”

Lawrence knew he couldn't argue his way out of this.

“..I'm sorry, but-”

“Save your apologies. I do not want excuses, I want answers. We are not your children, nor do we have to obey you, now do we?”

She wasn't angry. She was just stating the obvious. But if he replied he'd be admitting that he *was* ordering them. They weren't that innocent or naïve. In fact they were critical thinkers. To make decisions on his own in front of them was, well, like an act of betrayal.

“So tell me, what happened?”

Holo now spoke with a girlish smile. She denounced his behavior, but knew full-well that he must have his reasons. A merchant should never be obstinate, so Lawrence simply shook his head. Not in defiance, of course, but simply to clear his head. He then recalled his conversation with Eve.

“Eve wanted me to spy for her.”

“Oh.”

Holo answered curtly, nursing her bottle, but Lawrence didn't think anything of it. He continued.

“And so did Keeman.”

“So you are trapped between them.”

He nodded. This had all resulted from the earlier incident in the city.

“This mess happened because a northern boat found something valuable in the southern sea. The poorer northern district and the wealthy southern district are so pitted against each other that all it takes is a tiny spark to light such a fire. The southerners have challenged the northerners and claimed their prize, so Eve was ordered to take it back. But she was ordered by someone planning to profit who she's already planning to betray, so she asked for my help..”

Eve had offered him several hundred gold coins.. something Lawrence couldn't earn even if he made a thousand trades.

“What a female.”

Holo smirked and spoke with distaste. Cole seemed to fear he might say something unwise, so he turned away and kept quiet.

“But if Eve feels so free to announce her imminent betrayal, it stands that she would betray anyone.”

In theory, a double negative was a positive - the enemy of one's enemy was their friend. But double betrayal wasn't the same. No one could guess if there would be any profit in the end. Only Eve could tell.

“So you are being suspicious. I see. Indeed, even the people in your guild are trying to take advantage of you for their own ends. I can see why you are nervous.”

Holo gulped down some more wine and belched. For her to drink so joyously while discussing such a serious topic was enough to spark his anger, but Lawrence only flashed her a bitter smile. Merchants were like knights who had survived a war: they didn't spare their smiles.

“What could resolve all of these problems?”

“Well, if Eve will betray the north then it makes no difference to her who she profits from. So my best decision is to stick with Rowen, since that'll keep them happy and she'll be indirectly helped as well. Basically, all will be well if she doesn't take all the profit for herself and betray my guild and I.”

“Hmm..”

“On the other hand, if I work for the guild and outdo Eve, then my guild will profit and all will be well.”

“Which means that we must either optimistically observe or rely on the generosity of a villain.”

In any case Lawrence couldn't decide independently. He set his hands down on the table.

“Those are my best guesses based on what I've learned. Of course it must be more complicated than that, given how much I do not and cannot know. My involvement is to be manipulated by those above me.”

If Lawrence could grasp the truth and determine who was the manipulating from the shadows, he would have a chance to profit himself. But he had fallen into such depths that he was no longer sure he could see the surface clearly.

“As they say, gentlemen stand not beside falling walls.”

“Indeed.”

Lawrence took the letter back as he replied. As a lonely traveler, the stamp on that letter had been of great help to him. It was a magical emblem and a strong weapon and a shield at the

same time. He had never suspected its powers. So when that stamp was suddenly used against him, he saw no means of escape.

“So, you said that fox and your guild are hunting for the same item.. what might that be?”

“Oh.. ah, it's what you heard about earlier in the south.”

“The bones!?”

She meant the bones of a wolf-god much like herself, which were the reason that Lawrence and his companions had ventured away from their ultimate goal - Holo's homeland, Yoitsu. She had heard those bones were to be used by the church to convert pagans, while Cole wanted to confirm the existence of his homeland's god.

For these reasons, they were chasing that rumor. Her question sounded incredulous, but her eyes were dead serious. As a prize, the Narwhale had the same value as the bones. Those with power were in a frenzy over it for this reason.

“No, though it's something similar.. a beast from the northern sea, a magical horned creature. Eating of it's flesh extends life, and it's horn heals all disease. It's called the Narwhale, and it's been caught by a northern boat.”

Holo's ear, which had been listening as if his words were a snack to go along with her wine, suddenly flicked.

“What's wrong?”

“..nothing.”

Lawrence couldn't help but chuckle at her obvious lie, to which she raised her head.

“But, you..”

“Hmm?”

“These events all clearly spiral out from this Narwhale, correct?”

“Yes..”

“Then you still have other options, do you not?”

She turned her attention to Cole, who had been silently observing. It seemed she wanted him to come up with a third choice.



“Um, uh..”

“Straighten your back!”

After she knocked on his back, Cole finally answered.

“Uh.. why not have Miss Holo retrieve this Narwhale?”

“What!?”

Lawrence was awestruck.. he hadn't even considered that.

“Just for the sake of argument, she should easily be able to do it.”

Cole saw situations as though he lived on top of a hill looking down on them. Lawrence was deeply thankful for that perspective, and Holo appeared thrilled with his suggestion. It certainly would be trivial for her to steal the Narwhale.

Even if it was well-guarded, Holo's fangs could tear through weapons and armor. Before Eve and Keeman finished plotting, she could already steal it. But reality quickly caught up with Lawrence when he considered the consequences. He scratched his head and spoke.

“But it would quickly become troublesome. It would be easy to take it, but she would be seen, and selling it off would be too diffi-”

“Yes, of course, that is obvious.. but..”

Holo cut him off and spoke with half-closed eyes, her head amusingly tilted to the side.

“You do understand how simple this is, do you not?”

“Huh?”

“You do not? Then I shall enlighten you. You are terrified and only thinking of escape. But I could easily solve this with just my fangs and claws. It is beyond me how you can be so frightened when you have me beside you. But that is my mistake for choosing you as my partner.”

“..”

Lawrence had no recourse beyond looking at her. Her words were honestly true. Cheating in order to profit from a situation was a tactic a city merchant would find horrifying. but it came naturally to Holo. Lawrence could feel his face growing red.

“Ohoho.. you see, young Cole? This is what we call a 'tempest in a ladle'.”

Cole was staying out of this. Lawrence couldn't tell if he was being considerate of his feelings, but he secretly wished the boy would just laugh at him.. being on the receiving end of such a look of pity was unbearable. When another bitter smile crossed his face, Cole matched it.

His frazzled mind was clearing up, and Lawrence was now able to see the forest from the trees. As an apprentice, he had been taught to properly take stock of such situations. The Wisewolf of Yoitsu was with him now, always appearing strong even when drunk.

“Hey, you.. if you weather this storm, will it not be easier to gather information about the bones?”

“..that would depend on Eve. She offered to help me gather it from Ted Reynolds in exchange for my help.”

Holo raised an eyebrow; if it was out of anger or mockery was anyone's guess.. she simply stared at Lawrence.

“That fox is calmer than you. Look, our hunt for the bones is a problem on the same scale as this one, is that not so?”

Lawrence was rendered speechless.

“You warned me of this when we decided to investigate the bones. But the way you flinch now when faced with a problem on the same scale is just.. well.. at this rate..”

The anger on her face was finally calming, and she turned her face away from him.

“I am going to start doubting your words.”

She ended her sentence on a tone of sadness, looking at him out of the corner of her eyes. It was clear to Lawrence that she was challenging him.. she so dearly loved using this skill of hers.

“Did you not claim you were more than just a blustering human male who could only talk big?”

Lawrence was finally able to risk a smile. Being defensive in this situation was pointless, even if it was very human to instinctively react that way. He stared at the floor and whispered to himself before raising his head to answer.

“We won't run.”

“Alright, then you have nothing to worry about.”

“Because you'll be there for me?”

If this could help with her own quest to find the bones of the wolf-god, then Holo would help with tooth and claw with nary a second thought. Of course this was far from the ideal solution in Lawrence's mind. Holo nodded her assent and continued.

“You need not worry over who to sell it to.. as Cole suggested, I can eat it while the others fight over it. That would be the best solution.”

“Still, don’t blame me for not thinking of it.”

“It only shows how much you are not thinking about me.”

Cole was watching them as they spoke.

“I know that!”

Lawrence didn't hesitate before answering. But Cole seemed worried. As an observer, it looked like they were arguing. But he soon calmed himself.. Holo was wagging her tail.

“You say this and that all the time. Yet how many times have you needed my help? A third or fourth time cannot hurt.”

In fact, Lawrence didn't want Holo's help. But the reality was that she had saved him many times. Even if he learned from what happened, he felt he couldn't avoid relying on her. For that reason, he leaned in close to one of the ears she prized for being able to detect any lie.

“I didn't choose you as my partner because you're the Wisewolf of Yoitsu.”

Holo responded by looking at the floor and laughing. Cole didn't seem to be listening in, but Lawrence was too embarrassed to continue in his presence. Whether he would have been able to if it was just him and Holo, he couldn't tell.

“Then you must show me that you are good enough to not need the Wisewolf.”

“Of course.”

His answer was direct.

“Of course.”

If he was on his own, he would either flee or let himself be used. But there was a reason a smile had unconsciously crept onto his face. Would he really stay and confront such an overwhelming situation? Did he really have no choice? Wasn't it better to escape? Such thoughts were racing through his mind.

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They were staying at an inn recommended by Eve, which had been discovered by Keeman. Since they weren't going to flee, they could only wait to be contacted. If they acted independently it would leave a bad impression on both Keeman and Eve, who were sure to be watching them.

It didn't help that their opponents had the advantage in power and knowledge.. Lawrence could only react to their actions now. It was the logical thing to do, even if it was as unbearable as having to wait patiently on a chair in an office.

Of course Lawrence knew the better option would be to just lie in bed and wave his tail in a carefree manner like Holo.. but he couldn't help himself, so he sat nervously peering out the window. The sky of the season was gray, casting a shadow over people's hearts and leaving them depressed.

Lawrence understood just how small he was compared to the plans and greed of Keeman and Eve, and all he could do was sigh. He had been compelled to stay by Holo, but that didn't leave him feeling particularly brave. This wasn't a one-on-one contest between merchants.. it was a battle between great merchants capable of fighting several battles at a time.

Never do business you don't understand. Lawrence had been taught this by his master, and yet here he was violating that wisdom. He sighed and returned his gaze to their room in the inn. Holo had been grappling with the devil of slumber, but in the end she had succumbed and fallen asleep.

Cole had taken off his belt. The innkeeper had lent him a needle, so Lawrence suspected he wanted to repair the belt. But the opposite was true. Cole was pulling threads from the belt, tying them together to form a longer one. He then threaded the needle and took off his damaged coat. His intent now clear, Lawrence stood up and walked over to him.

"You don't have to sacrifice your belt, you know."

Cole was now busy stitching, skilfully mending his coat with the needle. He raised his head and smiled embarrassingly to acknowledge Lawrence, but kept sewing. As the thread gradually disappeared, his coat was repaired. For a merchant only capable of judging how profitable a product was, attempting such "repairs" would require a prayer.

"I'll buy you some thread."

"Hmm? There's no need.. see?"

He bit off the thread, then proudly raised the mended coat to display it. Holo would have knocked him on the head while wagging her tail, but Lawrence just placed his hand on his head and spoke.

“You just explained the riddle of the coins to me, and I haven't repaid you yet. Even Church lecturers expect a fee, don't they?”

Cole seemed to be debating how to answer, as if he had placed his optimism and the kindness of a friend on a scale in his mind. It evidently settled on the side of friendship, since he smiled and confirmed Lawrence's sentiment.

“Are you sure it's okay?”

“Would you like to buy some from a tailor? It might come in handy later.”

Lawrence said that despite knowing that, somewhat paradoxically, the thread would be more expensive than Cole's coat. The boy had left his home with a noble goal in mind, but he had likely started on his journey without much money. If Lawrence told him that the coat he had taken with him, which was full of memories, was worth less than a piece of thread, Cole could only be depressed.

“Sure, then.. thanks.”

Cole replied happily as he put his coat back on.

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Lawrence wanted to ask Holo to join them, but she was too busy snoring loudly. Since it was clear she wasn't going to awaken anytime soon, they left her behind. At least this way, Keeman and Eve would still find someone there if they visited.

“What kind of thread would you like?”

They soon found the tailor that the innkeeper had suggested. The situation with the Narwhale had left the city in a mess, but it seemed that only a small number of people were affected.

Power was what it was because it was held by a small number of people; to most, any concerns of land ownership and the city's reputation were as distant as the moon in the sky. That was how Lawrence had lived before he had met Holo. Through all of her scheming he had changed, but he still felt at home in such a “normal” way of life.

The tailor's shop was incredibly quiet. A young apprentice was busy daydreaming, his hands stained black with dye. Noticing potential customers, he flashed them a business smile. Lawrence replied likewise, taking in the smells of the world the youth was living in. They were smells that he knew.

“The price varies with the color.. which do you need?”

“Um.. I guess the color of my coat?”

As Cole looked at his coat, a voice rang out.

“Well, a pale yellow won't stand out.”

Cole's eyes opened wide in response. Yellow-dyed products were generally luxury items. The sweet smile on the apprentice's face made that fact even clearer. He seemed a year or two younger than Cole, yet somewhat more sophisticated. Craftsman's apprentices were always sent here and there on the whims of their masters; their lives were completely different from Cole's.

“Hmm.. but isn't yellow...”

Cole seemed concerned about how drastically the color would affect the price, and looked to Lawrence nervously, as no salesman would openly admit something like that.

“Oh, you're merchants?”

The apprentice cut Cole off and leaned in. He would earn more commission if he sold something more expensive.

“Ah, well, we came all this way so maybe we *should* buy something beautiful.”

Lawrence went along with the apprentice's business spirit. Cole seemed confused. The apprentice straightened his collar and puffed out his chest.

“Of course, of course.. please take a look at these.”

The young salesman brought out some samples. Each was merely the length of his palm, but they were so expensive that if they blew away and he lost them, he would go without food or pay for three days.

Only a spice from a place named Saffron could dye things yellow. Saffron was far across the seven seas, on the river to paradise. Yellow was a color seen to represent the value of gold. A valuable dye made a product valuable as well; the wealthy would purchase such products slavishly, and as they did the prices shot up accordingly.

Cole detected where the conversation was headed, and grabbed Lawrence's sleeve nervously.

“M-Mr. Lawrence!”

“Hmm?”

As Lawrence smiled and turned back, the young apprentices' voice called out in order to keep

his customer.

“Sir, sir! One more look, please! See how the color is still brilliant even when placed next to a piece of gold! This is our highest-quality piece.. what do you think?”

Lawrence nodded, and noticed the tailor had stopped working further in the shop and peered in their direction. He wouldn't care if the boy actually managed to sell the thread, but was keen to appraise his apprentice's technique.

The tailor's eyes met Lawrence's for a moment, and he smiled and waved. Lawrence replied with a nod before turning back to the boy.

“It's truly lovely.. as bright as gold.”

“Yes, indeed! So this-”

“However, don't you feel it might be a little too bright to go with this coat? Won't the seam be too obvious?”

The boy's business smile froze and Lawrence heard the tailor sigh.

“I'm afraid my problem will be solved with some gray string, which I'm sorry to say is the cheapest.”

The boy had no reply, having seen his commission from the golden thread vanish just like that. The tailor finally cut into the conversation.

“What length would you like?”

The man gave the boy's head a good knock with a rough hand. Trading with a canny merchant required one to be just as cunning if they wanted to sell for a good price. It seemed the man wanted to knock that lesson into the boy's mind.

“What can I get for three silver pieces?”

“Hmm.. it would loop around this spool five times. But, how about some in blue? Recently the dye's been abundant, so the price of blue thread's come down quite a lot.”

“Whew.. sounds like a great time to invest. I'm sure you'll make a killing when the price goes back up.”

The man, who seemed to have anticipated failure, simply smiled.

“I guess I'll just have to settle for gray thread valued at 3 silvers, then.”

He pulled out a spindle of gray thread and proceeded to close his sale.

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Afterward, Lawrence and Cole slowly returned to their inn. They walked along the river, looking at the city. Cole was two paces behind Lawrence, clutching the little bag of thread and looking rather upset.

“What's wrong?”

Cole responded with a face like a beaten dog. He was clearly smart enough to know that he had been had. But he was being more straightforward than Lawrence expected.

“Are you that hurt?”

“Well.. um, no..”

He averted his eyes as if looking for an escape route. Lawrence wondered if he was getting too used to traveling with a certain wily wolf.

“Holo takes advantage of you far more evilly, though.”

Lawrence said so, though he felt bad for offering any kind of excuse at all. Cole seemed to reminisce for a moment before nodding in embarrassment.

“True.”

“She also barks orders at me with no trace of shame. I'm no god, I'm just a merchant. It's as if she doesn't know the meaning of mercy.”

Lawrence still hadn't repaid Cole for the ointment, let alone his solution to the riddle of the coins. He wanted to reward the boy. But two-thirds of merchants kept their mouths shut in such a situation.. only a third would remind a seller they had forgotten to ask for payment. Lawrence struggled to decide which camp he fell into, but ultimately decided to be honest.

“Of course, even if I said that to her, she'd still travel with us.”

Cole smiled. Lawrence could see why she liked him.

“But you know, even if I'm not a god, I don't hate this treatment.”

“Eh?”

“If I hated her selfish whims, or felt she was too greedy, I wouldn't travel with her.”

Cole gripped the bag tightly and his smile widened.

“You're a prospective clergyman.. so if you won't ask anything else of me, then at least let me do a confession to help you practice.”

“Huh?”

“I should say that my behavior back there wasn't very respectable.”

Lawrence shifted his glance away from Cole and hesitated. Cole noticed, and steered himself into the mindset of a confessional, wearing a look that was truly becoming of a priest.

“How do you mean?”

“Honestly speaking? I was venting.”

“...venting?”

It was a bad habit of his to always speak before thinking, and he knew it. After raising his head to look at Lawrence, it fell back down again.

“You saw how frightened I was at the inn.”

Lawrence didn't have the nerve to laugh at Cole while he was opening himself up to the boy. Instead he offered him his hand. Royalty yelled to cover their embarrassment, while nobility coughed and normal people pretended to stumble. Cole did none of those. He would surely become a good clergyman.

“I did.”

That answer was too much, and Lawrence finally laughed out loud. Cole nervously tried to apologize, but Lawrence waved at him to stop.

“No, no.. that's just fine. You may be my student, but I can't very well slap your face just to save my own.”

Puzzled, the boy smiled and rubbed his face.

“But after acting so pathetically, I just wanted to feel a bit better about myself.”

“..you mean.. you also did that to teach me?”

A careful answer.. just what one would expect from Cole.

“Exactly. I showed you some tricks of the trade while playing the villain. I made you feel

nervous that I'd buy the most expensive thread, just to feel like a bigger man.. damn, I'm just a little kid, aren't I."

He scratched his face as he stared at the river, where some merchants stood near a boat that was being unloaded. He overheard some of their conversation on the wind. They were trying to talk their way aboard to get to the south side.

But the city's rule was to halt all boats during major incidents so no one could cross the river. It was devised by the landowners and those who controlled the river. Lawrence suspected the boatman wouldn't risk it. His kind would generally protect their own interests, no matter how hard the merchants tried to convince him.

They knew this yet this still tried to bargain, showing that the problem in the city was a big deal to them. Based on this, it was clear to Lawrence just how powerful Keeman was. There should be no way to have his letter delivered to Lawrence from the south right now.

"Your confession has been heard. May our merciful Lord forgive you."

Cole spoke in a priestly tone after hearing Lawrence's confession.

"My thanks."

Lawrence was truly grateful.

"However.."

"Hmm?"

Lawrence looked at Cole.

"You have other reasons for doing this, don't you?"

Cole stared at Lawrence with clear and pure eyes, piercing directly to his heart.

"You want to show that you can rise to Miss Holo's expectations."

The boy's eyes shone as if he was in the midst of a heroic legend. It was impossible for Lawrence to look into such honest and straightforward eyes. He looked away in shame, not knowing how to reply.

"Well.. that's part of it, yes."

Indeed, Lawrence was worried about that. His abilities were rather modest.

"I can't be of much help to you so please work hard!"

“Uh..”

Cole was standing tall in appreciation of Lawrence. His shame meant nothing to Cole, who still somehow held him in perfect esteem. In spite of having dragged him out to buy thread, messing with the tailor's apprentice, or using him to raise his own self-esteem, Cole didn't look down on Lawrence.. he seemed to actually trust him.

Lawrence understood this was just how Cole was, but it was still hard to believe he was so tough and determined to be like that. Merchants had more curiosity than a cat.

“You can still see me that way.. me, a shameful merchant who vents his frustration on others.. you really are amazing.”

Cole was surprised; he wasn't praising Lawrence, but had simply spoken truly from his heart.

“Wha..? But, um, you're traveling with Miss Holo.. even helping her find her home.”

“So?”

“Then.... the problem we face must be a big one judging by how you panicked.”

Lawrence wasn't sure what Cole meant. Indeed what he faced right now was beyond his abilities as a merchant, and even with Holo's support he was hesitant. But he was talking about something else.

Was he implying that since Lawrence was traveling with Holo, he must be a great person, and therefore the problem that great person was panicking over must be major? Or did he mean something else? While Lawrence was lost in thought, Cole continued.

“You're traveling with Miss Holo and continuing her legend, so of course the challenges and obstacles you face must be on a large scale. I'm truly grateful to have a chance to join the two of you.”

Cole flashed an honest smile. Lawrence had no idea where he got this idea of being in an adventurous legend. But ten years ago he had also hoped for such exciting adventures, so it made sense for a kid with the smarts of a merchant to feel the same way. Was there anyone more pure than this boy?

“True, she did say that she will talk about this journey forever. But then I need to look good in front of you.”

It was a weak attempt at a joke, but Cole still laughed happily.

“I don't want to be known as a burden on the two of you.”

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## Chapter 5

When they arrived back at their inn, they found Holo sound asleep, wrapped up in her blanket, and snoring. Lawrence and Cole looked at each other and smiled, at which point she ceased snoring. Were her ears really that sensitive? Or could she just detect such things through the air somehow?

Either way her eyes slowly opened, though she tucked her head back under the blanket as her body trembled from a tremendous yawn.

“So what will we do in the end?”

She could tell they had gone out, and called for Cole to come to her before sniffing him. Perhaps she wanted to find out what food she had missed out on, but Cole instinctively curled up his body in embarrassment.

“We merchants can't survive without a guild, so I can't afford to stand against mine.”

“Well it is cool under a large tree, and it offers protection for the small potatoes under it. It is the right place for you..”

Her harsh tone was quite similar to the one Eve had used earlier while trying to convince Lawrence to side with her. He was a small potato in this city, but that also meant he could move more freely during an incident that may have dire repercussions on its future. “Small potato” was a bit harsh... but it put things into perspective.

“To win the greatest profit in the short-term, our only real choice is to get the Narwhale together with Eve.”

“And escape hand in hand? That might be amusing, hmmm?”

If Holo wasn't around, was such a dangerous and adventurous choice even possible? Lawrence briefly considered it, realizing that if she wasn't there he would have already walked away from the situation.

“How stupid.”

Lawrence shrugged in response, noting that she was smiling while comfortably wagging her tail. He knew she would have continued, “If you are afraid of my idea, just say so”, but the play wouldn't be any fun if they revealed its central mystery to Cole so soon.

“Our whereabouts are known both by Eve and my guild. And we won't know when they will sweep us up into danger. So I'm just trying to make sure we're all clear, so we don't get mixed

up when the time comes.”

After he finished, Holo watched him silently for a moment before smiling.

“What is it?”

She didn't answer. But her smile was answer enough.. she was regarding him like she would a child who had fallen, but stopped himself from crying.

“Mmm.”

Holo nodded and gave Cole's head a knock. It seemed he and Cole both shared the same rank in her pack.

“Go on.”

Lawrence began his explanation at Cole's urging.

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It was quite late, so their requests for more wine were being met with yawns from the innkeeper. Lawrence had anticipated that Eve or Keeman would send for them, but no one came. He was so nervous he barely touched his wine. But he knew that he was worrying too much. Holo had managed to get Cole drunk, as usual. After confirming he was asleep, she threw herself on the bed as well.

“If I do not get him drunk, he will refuse to sleep on the bed.”

That was her story. Was it her way of being gentle? It actually felt more like violence.

“Then, this will be our last bottle of wine for tonight.”

It wasn't exactly as compensation, but because Lawrence had acted stupidly twice that day he obediently agreed to buy her wine. Of course, Holo had been hoping he would eventually do just that.. but she was obviously bored that he hadn't put up a fight. She should have reacted with contempt upon hearing “the last bottle for tonight”, but she instead opted to quietly abstain. She was as cunning as usual.. ever the Wisewolf.

“It would be even better if you could stop venting like that.”

She uttered this to him while sitting on the edge of the bed, having slid her tail under Cole's pillow and received the bottle from Lawrence. Of course she wanted him to ignore her words rather than answer, but Lawrence couldn't permit such childishness.. it would make her so happy, her tail would wag and wake Cole up. He chose his reply carefully.

“Perhaps.. but those who put on a tough front are the ones who die early. That's even how it is with mercenaries. Venting is a good thing.”

“Fool.”

She answered with displeasure, then lifted Cole's head by grabbing his ear, apparently to pull her tail out from under his head. Lawrence was surprised she wasn't being gentle until he noticed the drool trailing out of Cole's mouth.

“I can't afford to be careless.”

Holo sighed at this and stroked her tail. Lawrence watched them while eating some fried beans, eventually walking to the window to open the shutters and look outside. He only saw drunken men stumbling home.

With no festival going on, seeing so many drunkards wandering around was a bad sign for the city. Since the landowners ruled this end of town, it was a sign that the city was falling apart. The Narwhale could help turn this situation around. Its importance was becoming clearer and clearer.

“You are looking outside while I am here?”

Holo had moved to a chair and was now eating his beans. That daring, combined with the happy sound of her chewing, was enough to make him happy as well.

“We do have to be ready to run.”

That seemed to be a good enough answer for Holo. She chuckled and picked up a bean that had fallen on the table.

“Quite right. Hey.. will you not drink with me? It is lonely to drink on my own.”

She poked his cup, which was still full of wine. He stared at it, realizing that he hadn't even finished one cup yet.

“Why not. It seems there won't be any messages for us tonight anyway.”

“That much is uncertain.”

Sitting opposite her at the table, he reacted with confusion.

“Huh?”

“Foxes have excellent night vision.”

He shook his head and shrugged.

“Then it's all the more important that I drink.”

“Hmm?”

“If I'm drunk, I won't have to think about how I'm being used.”

Holo smiled wide enough to reveal a fang.

“Fool. If you do not sleep defensively, this story will come to an early end.”

“But if the prey does this, the wolf can catch them before the fox does, right?”

At his challenge, her other fang was finally revealed.

“It is difficult to say. Prey always expose their bellies to me. It would be careless of me to not eat them as quickly as possible. It could get dangerous.”

Lawrence had no choice but to counterattack such a severe assault.

“Then you shouldn't expose your tail to me so easily. If you really wish to prey upon me, you need to take care that I don't grab it.”

“You would not dare.. is that what you want me to say?”

Even Lawrence could lose his cool if he heard that from someone whose elbows were on the table, cupping their face in their hands while flicking their ears. He could tell she was hunting for something. But he decided to take a sip of wine before continuing his challenge.

“You're hiding something about the Narwhale, aren't you?”

But he was the one who ended up the most surprised. Holo, who had been smiling and lifting her cup to drink, flinched violently. If she had been acting, it would be his loss.. but she wasn't. Her eyes darted away, clearly realizing that she couldn't hide her loss of composure. She bit her lip and stared at him.

“I'm even more surprised than you are.”

His diplomacy seemed to work. After taking a deep breath, she paused for some time before sighing.

“That is why you are a fool.”

She drank the rest of her wine in her cup while complaining. Lawrence knew he had the

advantage, but he couldn't bring himself to make the next move. He looked like a child ready to receive a beating.

“Even if you wear that kind of expression, I will not tell you. I do not want to.”

She turned away after saying so. She was acting angry, but also looked childish.. it had to be on purpose. But she was always two steps ahead of him, sometimes to trap him and sometimes to maintain a safe distance from an attack.

When he tried to read her intent, her ears and tail became vital clues. Just as woodsmen and trappers communicated with smoke signals, Lawrence could interpret the subtle signals she was giving off. She was actually trying to conceal her embarrassment.. he couldn't help but chuckle at the revelation.

“If you dare make another sound, I will truly lose my temper.”

She turned away with her eyes closed. He debated whether or not he should laugh, but decided to raise his cup and take another drink instead. He couldn't decide on anything else.

Still, if Holo knew about the Narwhale, then she must have already known about its myth and legend.. that one would gain immortality by consuming its flesh, and heal any illness by consuming its horn. What was it that she feared, having lived for so long? It was all he could do to recall what she had told him on their journey.

Even Holo couldn't have known everything at birth, and must have been a rebellious child prone to foolishness. Yet even after all of that, if there was the slightest chance, she might make a wish.. a wish to bridge the gap between different life spans.

“I thought you understood, and pretended not to know for my sake.. I am such a fool!”

She had been watching him as she spoke, and realized that he had at least reached his place by her side. She continued to drink, neither crying nor depressed. That eased Lawrence's mind, because it meant one who had experienced much shame and embarrassment in their past could still freely smile.

“No.. to be honest, I thought you were inexperienced and naïve about such things. I didn't expect you would know about the legend.”

He believed the myth to be something only humans would care about.. something completely unrelated to Holo and her kind.

“Fool..”

She wiped some wine that had splashed on her cheek with her sleeve, then lay her face down

on the table. But her hands still held her cup, so she might simply be drunk.

“I take it you once searched for it?”

Holo nodded. It was probably several centuries ago.

“Back then, I really knew nothing about reality. I believed I could fix everything I did not like. I could travel if I hated being praised or depended-upon. I could make a friend if I had none. I believed that happy times could last forever.”

She continued to lie on the table, flicking the beans that had fallen off her plate at him. She had been honest until then. If her present personality could be called “weathered,” then it must have been razor-sharp back then.

“I even ended up crying over it.. I imagine you might like that.”

She smiled and looked up at him. If she continued flicking beans at his face, he would have to hide it behind his cup by drinking more.

“Oh ho.. but people laugh more happily when they share their sad tales with others.”

“That I cannot deny.”

Even Lawrence chuckled to himself when he recalled his past failures. But he didn't really want to remember them. The reason was obvious – it was too lonely to do so when he had no friends to share them with. He quickly realized how foolish such thoughts were, and that he shouldn't be entertaining them even for a second. After all, that sensitive wolf was still lying on the table, eyeing him and smiling.

“I have *you* now.”

It was too direct an attack to withstand. All Lawrence could do was flick beans back at her.

“You also have Cole.”

“I cannot reveal these things to him. He is the counterweight that reminds me that I am the Wisewolf.”

What did *that* mean? Lawrence's finger halted just before it flicked the bean, paused in thought. Cole was from a village in the north, and tended to view Holo as a living legend. There should be only one reason for her to describe him as a heavy stone..

Her finger suddenly flicked the bean at his fingertip.

“He praises me as the Wisewolf. He *was* foolish enough to ask whether he could touch my tail

the very moment he saw me. It has been centuries since I experienced that.. it brought back memories that made me very happy. He reminds me that I am the Wisewolf.”

Holo extended her hand to Lawrence's and their fingers entangled.



“Indeed, you *have* been more relaxed recently.”

“Mhm. I have no excuse.”

Judging from her words, it was Cole's view of her as the Wisewolf that reminded her of who she was. It was thus obvious why she would be doing this: the Wisewolf was worthy of Yoitsu, not the little girl living comfortably at a merchant's side.

“But still..”

As their fingers continued to play, as if holding their own argument, he continued.

“You kept something this big from me, even while always pushing me to be open with you when I need to make a choice.”

They had been through troubles born from keeping their thoughts from one another. Though he felt he was being unusually aggressive, Holo answered him calmly.

“My profit would only decrease if I openly discussed business matters.”

If she hadn't smiled like a mischievous child while saying that, Lawrence would have found it impossible to accept, even with the bitterest of smiles. She sat up tall, stretching her body and flicking her ears.

They couldn't let themselves grow too close.. they both knew that important rule deep in their hearts. However, and ironically, the fact that they were so aware of this meant that the opposite was happening. Lawrence had even ignored the rule before.

Holo must have kicked at the stones along the incredibly long path of her life. But she couldn't change reality. When she described Cole as “a counterweight”, it was no exaggeration. She didn't just tease Lawrence with Cole for fun.. it was a defense mechanism.

He was a way to keep them from crossing the line. A way to obscure what was difficult to solve. Even if it was an excuse.

“We are all greedy, and selfishly fight for ourselves.”

“That's true. Although..”

Lawrence paused, but opted to continue with a hint of irony.

“Although, if I wasn't greedy, I would be able to buy you more good food.”

Hearing his sarcasm, Holo was embarrassed into smiling and standing up. Her face was so red he suspected it might be too warm in the room. As anticipated, she closed her eyes like she did

when she opened a window and felt a cool breeze wash over her.

“Hmm.. but is my happiness not your profit?”

She looked like a cat enjoying having its neck scratched. As if a cool breeze had indeed washed over her, she opened a curious eye to study him. Her theatrics were so good it was as though she was watching herself in a mirror.

“If you could truly be bribed with just food, then that might be the case.”

Her eye closed again. It was eerie how she could repeat the same gesture, yet make it look like she was sulking the second time. But it was only for a moment, she quickly transformed into a proud noble.

“Then how *would* you bribe me?”

Lawrence could remember a time when a trading partner of his, a village, requested that he try to sell wine barrels to a nearby convent with a large vineyard. The abbot was a proud and cheap man. He was quite demanding and made it a really hard sell.

Considering himself to be in a high-class convent, perhaps that abbot felt himself to be closer to God. He was quite disrespectful. But the actual god in front of Lawrence now hated being treated as a higher being, and so avoided such behavior. Why would the Wisewolf be acting this way?

The abbot wouldn't consider the losses of the people selling to him; he was only concerned about the profits of his own party. But the preconditions of this situation were different, so the results had to be different as well. She was probably hoping for this answer.

“If not by food, then by words or attitude.”

“And how could I place my trust in such things?”

Even a smirk full of fangs could become endearing when one got to know the person behind it. If he didn't trust her, he could only respond in a servile fashion. To prove his sincerity he either had to stand, or sit still and not run away.. either was an attractive prospect, making it difficult to decide. He gulped down the rest of the wine in his cup before replying.

“Imagine that you have been deceived and trust both. They might turn out to be true.”

“..”

The words of Eve, the wolf of the Roam river, were quite potent. Holo glared at him and swished her tail to show her displeasure. She couldn't counterattack. It was rare that he had an advantage over her in a debate, and it made him feel better than when he was playing with the

tailor's apprentice. Defeat could reduce even a mighty eagle into a humble chicken. And victory could turn a timid mouse into a fierce wolf. But real wolves were born to be cunning.

“That is not what I was talking about.”

She spoke with a lonely expression, seeming a bit angry. Such debates were supposed to be battles of wits and controlling the mood. But Holo's tactics were never fair. What was she getting at? Watching him as he pondered this, Holo flung the shutters out wider.

Lawrence had uttered his troublesome line earlier in front of the window, saying that they had to prepare to run. She gazed out of the window, but her ears were still trained on him. She couldn't even mutter “uh” under her breath to acknowledge a minor defeat. It was stupid of him to think of winning against her.

“It would be nice if you treated the loser more kindly.”

He decided to stand up and walk to her before making his appeal. When he sat next to her on the windowsill, she silently sat in his lap.

“Winners have no time for losers.”

“Sitting on me and saying that.. that isn't horrible at all.”

As she sat on him her ears brushed against his cheeks making them itch. Her arsenal of excuses was endless.

“Well.. perhaps this time I might be able to place a little trust in you.”

“In fact, merchants may have an admirable smile, but secretly they also stick out their tongues.”

He felt the line was rather weak, but Holo was always tough with her replies.

“Indeed, both beasts and humans will forget their tongues when they give up.”

“Hmm.”

He didn't want to hand her this victory, but because he had no retort he just sighed and leaned his back against the window frame. She laughed and spoke.

“No matter if it is you or I, we are not alone when we give up.”

It was a powerful thing to say after a day like this. He gave her a gentle hug before replying.

“I'll remember that.”

“Mhm.”

She gave a slight nod as her tail gently wagged. The only sound during this quiet moment was the snoring of the boy who Holo had made drunk.

Remembering that Holo was the Wisewolf was a good way to keep Lawrence from growing short-sighted, but the pros and cons of this had yet to be determined. But it did act as a counterweight to balance the scales.

Holo seemed to be thinking the same thing as she smiled with her eyes closed. Lawrence bent his arms to hug her small body more tightly, but as he did-

“Hmm.”

“Wh-what is it?”

As he struggled to remain calm, drops of cold sweat formed on his brow. Holo always enjoyed seeing those. Her smile widened and her tail wagged. She then slowly rose while swiveling her ears to and fro. He would soon realize why her face darkened.

“You must sometimes attest to the accuracy of my sixth sense.”

“What?”

He instantly detected that she was talking about something else. They both turned to look out the window together.

“Do you not see? What was the name of that poor shop owner?”

“Reynolds, you mean?”

Lawrence spotted a fat man in a tight coat crossing the road to their inn between the drunkards. The way he walked while trying to keep an eye on everyone was comically unnatural.

“This is a good chance for you to prove your conviction.”

Lawrence took no issue with the fact that it was Reynolds that had come. As she turned away, he spoke quietly into her ear.

“Then feel free to listen in while you ‘sleep’.”

She was acting like a child, but the malicious smile on her face made it obvious that she was happy from the very bottom of her heart.

“You mean stick my tongue out?”

It was her most-loved skill to hide several meanings in each sentence. Lawrence knew he would be trapped no matter how he answered, so he just brushed her tail aside impolitely.

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Naturally, confidential information was only meant to be known by a few parties. But for one of those parties to arrive during the night showed just how confidential it was. This was very different from Keeman and Eve's method of sending others to fetch Lawrence.

“My apologies for calling on you so late.”

Despite the cold, Reynold's girth was such that he arrived not shivering but sweating.. either that or he was panicking. He spoke quite softly, but it wasn't likely out of fear that he would disturb Holo and Cole's slumber.

“Shall we talk outside?”

At Lawrence's suggestion, Reynolds briefly looked back at the door, but soon turned back and shook his head. He was a proper city merchant; it was more for him dangerous to talk outside. Unlike for a traveling merchant, where confidential discussions were safer in fields than indoors, who knew what ears were listening in on the other side of the walls?

“Wine?”

Reynolds had accepted Lawrence's offer of a seat, but when offered wine he shook his head at first. But he quickly changed his mind.

“Well, maybe a little. At least you aren't drunk.. I see I wasn't wasting my time.”

A traveling merchant's room wasn't luxurious enough to cater to a sudden guest. Lawrence poured some wine into the cup Cole had used earlier. Reynolds wore a sheepish smile.



“It’s about the Narwhale, isn’t it?”

Given that Reynolds came at this hour, it stood to reason that he felt Lawrence was already informed of the situation. He had already read Eve's introductory letter, and anyone bearing such a letter should have no trouble learning of the situation in Gerube.. that much could be inferred.

Lawrence didn't bother asking how Reynolds learned of his address. Even Keeman, who lived on the other side of town, knew that already. To a city merchant, Lawrence was just another fly on the spider's web. Lawrence sat down with these thoughts in his mind.

Reynolds nodded, continuing to act subserviently.

“I'm at a total loss. I was hoping that you, Mr. Lawrence, might have learned something.”

Lawrence remembered hearing a drunken merchant say that women looked different in the sunlight and candlelight.. that was true enough, and it also applied to merchants. Reynolds was acting every bit like the trapped owner of a doomed little shop. But if that was true, he wouldn't be here at such a late hour. Reynolds was hiding much between his words.

“I'm sorry, I know no more than you do.”

“You've been to the Lidon inn, haven't you?”

If he was already cutting to the chase, his time was probably limited.. although there was always the chance this was just the way he dealt with other merchants. Lawrence looked away slowly, then slowly turned back to face him.

“The Lidon inn?”

His ability to keep such a straight face and calm mind was probably a testament not just to himself, but also to Holo's ability to fool others. The expression on Reynold's face froze, probably shocked that Lawrence wasn't betraying any embarrassment at such a lie.

“Lying now won't benefit either of us. I know you've been there.”

Reynolds set his cup down and extended his palms to Lawrence. It was a common gesture for requesting honesty, but was meaningless between merchants. Lawrence was deep in thought. Reynolds knew he was sent to Eve, but not the purpose of his visit.. he could keep that much hidden.

“Mr. Reynolds, I'm sure you won't buy that I was just visiting a friend.”

He sighed as if he was giving up. It was an act that even Holo, who could detect any lie, would have trouble spotting. This was a world where half-truths were as dangerous as lies. Lawrence

continued.

“Ms. Eve informed me of the situation in town. Of course my response was: ‘so in this suspicious situation, I am being called to a suspicious place by suspicious means’.”

Lawrence heard the rustling of clothes on the bed. Holo had probably turned over, likely to hide the grin on her face.

“She seems to be in quite an odd situation. Her face was calm despite clearly thinking over a number of things.. but in the end she didn't feel it was worth sharing those with me.”

“Really?”

Reynold's eyes opened wide as he responded. It was a far more fitting expression than his subservience.

“Yes.”

The more plain and direct he was, the more convincing it would be. Reynolds stared at him for a time before sighing and relaxing.

“Forgive my impoliteness.”

“That's alright.. you're clearly nervous. This matters that much to you?”

Changing the tone of a conversation like this was a commonly-used trick, so even if Reynolds seemed more relaxed, Lawrence couldn't drop his guard.

“No, I'm actually nervous because I'm being totally left out of things.”

He sighed and shifted his body on the chair. Lawrence recalled how the D'Jean Company was being exploited by the Gerube landlords. Sometimes a company like that might be helped, but more often than not they would be left out to dry as soon as things turned sour.

When things took a turn for the worse, friendships crumbled. That was the just way things were. Merchants were commonly involved in life-threatening situations, so that harsh reality often bore down on them.

Furthermore, Reynolds already had a bad reputation, conducting profitable business in the poorer north end of town, and without the capital necessary to gain support. It was obvious that when things got tough he would be left on his own.

“And you should already know that much. But I still have a good relationship with the powerful figures in town.”

It would have been better if he meant it to dress up his authority. But Reynold's words were very important. He expected that Lawrence had learned much from Eve. Moreover, for the sake of the Narwhale, he was secretly visiting Lawrence this late at night. Lawrence was beginning to see Reynold's thoughts.

He figured Eve would be in an important position during this Narwhale mess, at least important enough to gather information about it. And indeed, earlier that day Eve had casually revealed many things to Lawrence that were proving to be true.

“But I thought you were in the copper business, so why..”

Reynolds smiled at Lawrence's indirectness and scratched his nose. He stared off into the distance, whether he was scheming or at a complete loss. Lawrence sipped on some wine and waited for him to continue. He soon raised his head.

“It's the same as when you came to inquire about the wolf-god's bones. I thought this incident could help me turn the tables.”

He rubbed his smooth face. The smile he wore bore no guile, which was rather unusual for a merchant. It threw Lawrence off.. it wasn't easy to take it at face value. D'Jean's certainly was in a bind, and Reynolds wanted to escape the grasp of the northern landowners.

“I came with a sliver of hope that I could get a connection with the ‘wolf of the Roam’.. but, haha.. it seems I'm only causing problems for you. I'm sorry.”

He smiled pathetically and relaxed his face. Speechless, Lawrence could only smile along with him. A silence then followed, which Holo finally broke by grumbling in her sleep.

“Ah.. it's so late now. Sorry again.”

Reynolds rose to his feet. It seemed his late visit could be explained as a last-ditch effort. He was afraid of being discovered, and could only ask someone who didn't live in Gerube for help. Lawrence couldn't help but feel bad for him.

“No, I'm sorry that I can't be of any help to you.”

“And I'm sorry I can't give you a proper answer for your problem.”

They smiled at each other to lighten the mood, which became a bitter smile as silence swept over them once again. They finally shook hands.

“If you see the wolf again, please tell her that Reynolds is complaining about her.”

“Heh.. alright, got it.”

Lawrence flashed him another smile.

“Again, sorry for pestering you at this hour.”

Reynolds made his final apology as Lawrence walked him to the door. He then walked away heavily, quite a contrast from how he had walked when he arrived. Lawrence politely said goodbye, which Reynolds returned with a chuckle before disappearing down the stairs.

Even with the connections he had in the city, and his monopoly over the copper business (which could keep himself wealthy his entire life), watching his back was like watching an abandoned dog. The feeling of loneliness was palpable.

Lawrence returned to his room, sighing and sitting back down on his chair. He sipped some more wine while replaying their conversation in his mind. He was feeling the weight of the entire situation bearing down on him once more. Even Reynolds, a merchant with a certain amount of power, was after the Narwhale. No, he wasn't just after it.. he was desperate for it.

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“Well, time for bed.”

After whispering to himself, Lawrence blew out the candle and made his way to his bed. He shuffled his way past the bed with Holo and Cole and lay down in his own. Wrapping himself in his blanket, he sighed. His eyes weren't yet accustomed to the dark, so he only barely noticed Holo's open eyes.

“It seems he has finally gone.”

She seemed to disappear for a moment, probably because she looked away elsewhere. Lawrence closed his eyes.

“Thanks for your hard work.”

“It was good that you did not speak with me immediately.”

She sat up in bed and replied cheerfully. As he had suspected, Reynolds had probably returned to spy on them and overhear Lawrence telling Holo and Cole to keep the truth hidden.

“As expected, he is a tough one.”

Lawrence smiled back.

“Then I guess I did alright.”

“Well.. he was acting so depressed that even I nearly fell for it. I did not think him so wily.”

“A merchant has room for things both hot and cold in their wallet. Those may be his true feelings, even if he was acting far too discouraged.”

“Merchants can be quite resilient, can they not?”

“Indeed.”

His smile widened as he continued.

“That being said.. what do you figure his goal was?”

He asked Holo despite knowing the answer, and got an immediate response.

“He wishes to speak with that fox, and is doing everything he can to do so.”

“As I thought..”

“Then why did you ask?”

She pushed herself off the bed with one hand to lean forward with a mischievous smile. She was also asking a question despite knowing the answer.

“No real reason. I was just interested.”

She smiled and wiggled her ears, obviously seeing through his façade. Merchant's wallets really did have room for things both hot and cold. He groaned and stretched, placing his hands behind his head.

His nervousness was why he was asking for her opinion, though he could only hide it behind a line like “I was just interested.” He knew he was an open book to her, but he was still a man.. he needed to save at least a little face.

But she also took great delight in such things. She sat on her bed, smiling brightly. If he lost his composure now, she would be overjoyed. The only way to hide his nervousness was hiding it behind curiosity. She could easily crumble that mask with her paws, but it would be too terrible to destroy this atmosphere.

“I'm going to sleep.”

With that, he turned his back to Holo. If he was being too stupid, his back would feel it any second now. But all he heard was her tail rustling.

“Good night.”

She purposely made a noisy show of burying herself under her covers. It seemed she didn't want to chew her toy to pieces. In that moment, Lawrence made his choice: he loved seeing her happy, so he would continue being a toy strong enough for her enjoyment.

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Despite not being Holo, Lawrence had anticipated what happened the next morning. It happened just as Holo ate their largest piece of cheese with her rye bread (using the excuse of finishing up the leftovers from their river-journey).

Even Cole smiled bitterly as she wolfed down the bread, until she suddenly withdrew her grin and put on a serious expression. At first Lawrence suspected she had bitten her tongue, but thankfully the truth was revealed before he ventured to ask.

Their innkeeper, who should have been downstairs serving breakfast or tending to departing patrons, was paying them a visit. But if that was all then she would only have put on her robes, not signaled to him with her eyes as Cole opened the door. The innkeeper was with someone else.

“Good morning, Mr. Lawrence.”

It was a crisp, powerful voice with matching confidence. It belonged to Keeman, who was dressed like nobility.

“..good morning.”

By the time Lawrence replied, the innkeeper had already received a few silver coins from Keeman and curried away. It must have been an imposition on the innkeeper at this time, but Keeman acted as if it was nothing. He was showing off to Lawrence, although he made it seem quite natural.

“Oh, you're in the middle of breakfast. My apologies for calling on you so impolitely.”

His tone didn't match his words, it was as if he meant to say “you are but a traveling merchant, yet here you eat breakfast as though you were a noble.” Lawrence was aware that the residents of Gerube didn't eat breakfast; they considered it unnatural to eat so early after waking up.

“Not at all. We were almost done. How may I be of service?”

There weren't many reasons that Keeman would visit him after sending his letter. It was clear that since Lawrence hadn't fled, he would be cooperative. As far as Keeman was concerned, this was an enemy lair and filled with temptations of betrayal, so it was obvious he had come to bring Lawrence to the south. He wasn't at all polite as he surveyed the room. He replied like a child happily giving a smart answer.

“May I ask you to join me outside for a moment? There appear to be mice in this place.”

It was a curious thing to say. Mice were a friend to travelers, yet an evil for those responsible for storing goods in port towns. Keeman clearly meant he didn't want any eavesdroppers, but using such a euphemism implied that he might actually harbor a hatred of mice.

“If possible, I would ask you to leave this inn. Your luggage.. ah, it seems to be ready.”

Lawrence of course realized that “if possible” didn't make it any less of a command. But he had anticipated this much, and was fine with it. However, he felt nervous that his luggage was perhaps set aside in the corner of the room too tidily.. it might reveal how close he had been to fleeing.

“Then I shall be waiting downstairs.”

Lawrence couldn't tell if Keeman noticed that.. he had left too quickly. His entrance was grandiose, but his exit was straightforward, like a demonstration.

“Hmph. So *that* is what made you so fearful.”

“Right?”

Somehow she was disappointed with Lawrence again. She popped the last piece of bread in her mouth and whispered.

Cole, however, was surprised at her evaluation.

“Huh? He seemed kind of handsome to me..”

Lawrence and Holo looked at each other, then walked up to Cole simultaneously.

“Do *not* grow up to be like him.”

The boy blinked, then nodded.

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Lawrence went downstairs to find Keeman talking with the innkeeper. Keeman then resumed condescending to Lawrence.

“Ah, let us graciously accept the wagon awaiting us at the front door.”

He seemed to know that Lawrence came in through the rear entrance after his visit with Eve. Given that Lawrence told him he knew Eve, Keeman must have considered the possibility that

he was her spy. But he still clearly saw Lawrence as essential.

“My humble apologies for not preparing a covered carriage. Ah, please.”

A beautiful six-seater passenger wagon was waiting for them outside the inn. The bearded old driver peered at them from behind his eyepatch for a moment, then averted his gaze forward.

There were many retired sailors in Gerube who continued to work in such ways after being injured or growing old. This driver was missing a pinky and ring finger on his left hand, which was holding the reins. The back of that hand was also scarred. He didn't seem to be the talkative type.

The wagon had seats facing the front and the rear, so Lawrence was seated facing the direction they were traveling, while Keeman faced the opposite.

“The port, please.”

The driver nodded at Keeman's request and quietly and began their journey.

“So, the reason I came to you this early is-”

“-that a favorable deal is to be settled in enemy territory.. or so I take it?”

Keeman's face froze at Lawrence's interjection. He then nodded appreciatively. His gesture revealed that he saw Lawrence as a fool, and so was clearly surprised. He must have thought that he had driven fear deep into Lawrence from the onset. Of course, Lawrence would be nervous if Holo wasn't at his side.

“Mmm-yes. To prevent such incidents from expanding, people such as us are prohibited from crossing the river. Contact is normally limited to letters delivered on arrows, but this time things are quite anxious. We've thus decided to resolve the problem with the delta, we the young ones who are its guardians. The other parties should now be in talks to agree upon an exact date and time.”

Those who enjoyed showing off and basking in their privilege, like Keeman, would now be gathering in the northern end of town. They would be leveraging this situation to make themselves or their companies more prosperous. Keeman wasn't attending, out of sheer confidence that he was at the top, and that only he could have an audience with Eve.

“I take it this mess is all over the Narwhale, then?”

Keeman wasn't surprised at the question. He instead nodded, realizing that he could save time and not explain the situation.

“Correct. It's reputed to be a more effective medicine for gout than even bird's hearts. You can

well imagine how many nobles would be after that, yes?”

“..since gout is the punishment for that most deadly sin, gluttony.”

Lawrence found himself relaxed, as some of that line was aimed at Holo. He was still afraid of Keeman in the sense that his words were never to be trusted, but he didn't feel any unnecessary fear.

“The merchants of those noble families will have already sent fast messengers to inform their masters of the situation. Yet, it is possible for us to list those nobles who most want the Narwhale.”

“It sounds like you're preparing for a fight?”

Keeman's eyes narrowed as he smiled.

“Indeed.”

Their wagon ventured off a narrow path onto the avenue that ran along the river. It was quite early, but they should still see people trying to cross the river. Or perhaps the prohibition had been lifted, since they could see many boats with people crossing the river from the wide view the avenue afforded them.

“So how deeply did you discuss things with Ms. Eve?”

Keeman was already trying to bait him. Lawrence put on his best act and smiled.

“Hmm? Ms. Eve?”

Lawrence didn't fail to notice Keeman's temple twitch slightly.

“Apologies, my mistake.”

After that Keeman quietly watched the river. Given where Lawrence was staying, it would be obvious that he met with Eve. Keeman was already fishing for the truth and a means to grab Lawrence's reins. He was only silent now because he had underestimated Lawrence.

Odds were good that was considering how to change his strategy now that Lawrence was resisting his manipulations. Lawrence took the chance to speak, although he had no intention of trying to win over Keeman.

“Now that you mention Ms. Eve, I do recall briefly chatting with her near the Stream of Gold.”

“..oh?”

Keeman turned slightly toward him, with the cold eyes of a merchant only interested in his own lot, not in the concerns of others.

“She told me that there's nothing more irksome than selling things that can't be bought with money.”

Keeman smirked.

“Yes, yes.”

Lawrence had no desire to make an enemy out of Keeman. He was actually repeating what Eve had told him when she spoke of the landowner's son, who aimed to marry her. He was revealing that he wouldn't hide the fact that he spoke with Eve, even if he did conceal the main topic of their conversation.

The implication was that it now depended on how Keeman behaved. Keeman remained silent after that; it seemed he had received the message. If Keeman continued underestimating Lawrence, he would need to scrap his plans.

They all boarded a vessel heading to the south end of town. As Keeman paid the boatman, Holo gave his foot a happy stomp as if to remind him not to get too full of himself. He knew she also thought he could do it if he tried, but he didn't reply.. although he had done well so far, his palms were drenched in sweat.

The south side was vastly different from the north side of town. The buildings shared common architecture. The roads were well-maintained and paved with beautiful stones. It was that first time he had been in such a familiar place with the feeling that he was surrounded by enemies.

“Alright, let's go.”

At Keeman's lead, Lawrence and his companions made their way deeper into this nest of enemies.

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Chapter 6

“I promise not to cause you any trouble.”

They were brought to a five-floor inn not far from the Rowen guild-house. With such a plain entrance - and interior – it was likely one of the guild's establishments for its traveling merchants. Lawrence and company were granted a room on the third floor facing the center of the inn.

It was a decent room. Compared to Eve's recommendation, it was both free and had a nicer atmosphere. But it was difficult to grasp what Keeman meant. Was he saying that he wouldn't put too much pressure on them with his monitoring?

“If you need anything, call for the innkeeper. Also, if you would be so good as to tell us your destination when you head out, it will avoid any unfortunate incidents.”

Lawrence expected to be barred from leaving, so this was a surprising turn of events. But this graciousness implied that Lawrence would be watched and dealt with if he met anyone in secret. That was certainly in Keeman's power. Lawrence hid this thought under his merchant's mask and gave a simple reply.

“I understand.”

“Then please have a rest.”

Keeman smiled and left without waiting for another response. Lawrence couldn't react at first, simply staring at the closed door. He had expected Keeman, like Eve, to reveal the role Lawrence was expected to play. He felt as if he was being given the cold shoulder.

“..what's he thinking?”

He scratched his head and sighed. Having come to, he discovered Holo laughing and rolling around on the bed. Cole was running his hand across it as well, obviously surprised.

“What is it?”

Cole responded by turning to him with bright eyes.

“It's cotton! There's cotton inside!”

“Cotton?”

“Hey, you, come here and lie down.. it is wonderful, like sitting on a cloud.”

If the bed was stuffed with cotton the fees for the room were likely quite steep. Given Keeman's high spirits and the principle of fair compensation, Lawrence's role must be important enough that Keeman would make a profit after paying for this room. Abstract business concepts were becoming more and more concrete.

Lawrence investigated the room to discover that it was rather luxurious. The window's seams were quite tight, so the room wouldn't be cold and drafty. Looking down from the window revealed a large flower garden.

“..”

If the room was like this, their meals would likely be just as luxurious. Lawrence was aware of this strategy, of appealing to one's work ethic by treating them above their status. The recipient of such treatment would feel surprised, and instinctively repay the graciousness with interest by working extra hard.

Fear began to creep back into Lawrence's heart. If he had suspected this trick he would have asked Keeman to give him a more detailed explanation. As he pondered these things he turned his gaze back into to the room.

“Fool.”

Holo was standing right next to him. He nearly jumped right out of the window.

“Wh- what?!”

“That is what I should be asking you. Why stand there lost in thought and wearing such an ugly expression? You have been granted a room beyond your means, so you must enjoy it to your fullest.”

Holo sounded disappointed. Behind her, Cole looked on with surprise, perched on the cotton bed

“Uh..”

Lawrence had no way to answer; Holo didn't give him any time to think. She poked his chest with her index finger and continued.

“You truly are a fool. Do you know why that nasty boy left without saying anything? There will be no eavesdropper this time, he is not the type. In fact, I find him rather interesting.”

She turned to the door and resumed, revealing her fangs.

“If what you told me is true, then you are still suspicious in his eyes. You do have a connection

with that fox, after all. So what does he have to do if he wants you on his team? Of course he must confirm if you are working for her.”

Her comment seemed reasonable, but it didn't explain Keeman's behavior.

“So just because he isn't sure if I'm friend or foe, he neglected to explain anything?”

At that, Holo twisted her face into a smile-like expression that was far from being a true smile. He was on the wrong track, and his punishment was to have his beard yanked.

“You have been brought into the territory of one you cannot deduce is *your* friend or foe, and have been left to your own devices. What would one normally do? Even you have gone out to acquire information upon arriving in a town, have you not?”

Sitting behind Holo, Cole was enjoying her speech. That must be why she was acting this way, despite wanting to help. If Lawrence didn't want to have to save face in front of Cole, he should have predicted this. Of course he'd considered the situation already, but Keeman's purpose still eluded him. Seeing the confused look on his face, she released his beard and crossed her arms.

“It is the same for man or wolf.. one must go and see those whom they know or trust. Put in another way, you navigate unfamiliar territory using the map within you. A beast's heart cannot be seen, but once they move it is revealed through their behavior. Just like my ears and tail, or *your* beard.”

It was a fine joke; he was unconsciously stroking his beard.

“To put it simply..”

If he was unable to give her a good answer now, then she might as well grab Cole and drag him with her straight back to Yoitsu. So when she paused, he immediately finished her sentence.

“..he's testing me to see where I go when my nerves get the better of me.”

“..”

She was silent for a while, probably because she had already swallowed her anger at his slow pace.

“Correct.. the reason he put us in such an expensive room was..”

“To make us worry.”

She then shrugged, flicked her ears and turned away. Cole, the student, widened his eyes and slowly nodded.

“So what is it we should do?”

Cole was stunned for a moment and couldn't answer. He was thinking furiously, and Holo's tail swished about to make it plain that she expected a prompt answer. It was like tempting a starving dog with meat. Lawrence noticed his disadvantage and knew he was trapped.. she had taken the lead and now had *two* foolish males in her palms to play with.

“We should enjoy ourselves to our fullest.”

Lawrence replied first, but the sad fact was that Cole had begun opening his mouth to speak. Holo first glanced at the boy, then slowly turned around and smiled to show her appreciation.

“Since, if we assist Keeman from the bottom of our hearts, then this isn't a nest of enemies – it's our main camp.. our home. We should have nothing to fear.”

Hearing this, Holo nodded and flicked her ears as though she had just found a treasure she sought. Lawrence walked past her to Cole, and asked if he had come to the same conclusion. The boy smiled and nodded sheepishly.

“Moreover, if you wish to send someone on a mission, but think they may crumble under the pressure, would you not have second thoughts?”

Before now, since Lawrence always traded and thought on his own, he never really gave it much thought. The idea to use someone was so alien to him that he never thought past that point.

He was confident in his own skills, and in this world there were many who were skilled with spears and arrows. But the ones who won the wars were the generals who never had to touch a weapon. For a long time, that had been Holo's role. Her small and slender body now seemed much larger to Lawrence.

“When I was doing these kinds of things, I did not use such roundabout methods.”

Holo proudly smiled to show off her white fangs.

“I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu!”

With her hands at her hips, she stood tall in praise of herself. Although she hadn't done this for a long time, she had never lost her carefree complacency. For Cole to be regarding her with admiration, it couldn't be such a bad thing. If the Wisewolf was *too* wise, she wouldn't be able to act with such childish pride.

“So, what do you suggest as our next course of action?”

It was an honest question.

“To simply wander around.”

“Indeed. With brash confidence.”

She stole a peek at him, obviously being careful to confirm that he understood. He opted to intentionally ignore it.

“Then, hmm.... Let's go see the Narwhale at the church.”

He spoke in a grandiose manner to underscore the fact that this had been his original idea. Cole seemed a bit surprised, and Holo also feigned surprise. He had to give her credit, she was an expert at reading the mood.

“Also, when we passed by earlier, you saw the large crowd that was there. If we ask, its likely we'll be permitted to see it.”

Lawrence didn't think that going to see the Narwhale whilst under suspicion of working for Eve would be a clear sign of betrayal. After all, if Lawrence intended to betray him, he wouldn't try to draw attention like that. Of course this was all just conjecture; Keeman might still react unexpectedly.

“What do you say? It's too boring just idling here eating and drinking.”

It was a suggestion worthy of the Wisewolf. He took some time to consider and declare it, but it was just brash enough to pass muster.. it contained two opposing ideas: the confidence of a Wisewolf, and her child-like sense of intrigue. Or so he hoped.

And indeed, she seemed thrilled. It must have been a relief to hear such an answer from him.

“That is a good suggestion, coming from you.”

Such an evaluation from Holo was like a top grade in a schoolroom. Even Cole stood up, looking forward to the plan. They were such a ridiculous trio.. but such ridiculous behavior was more comforting than just about anything.

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As expected, when they told the innkeeper they wished to see the Narwhale, he replied that just had to mention Keeman's name to the church. Keeman must have been prepared for this. Holo didn't seem to mind, but once they set foot outside the inn, several people began following them.

The church was on the avenue at the southern tip of the port. It was a grand place. In contrast to the north side of town, the height of buildings here were regulated. Even their décor and

architecture couldn't be too expensive or luxurious. The church was therefore able to stand out with solemn beauty.

It towered higher into the sky than any other building, crowned by a large and shiny bell. The doors facing the road were made of a hefty wood, strengthened with many layers of wood and metal, that required much force to open; it was said to be strong enough to withstand any evil spirit wishing to enter the church.

It was a building made of large pieces of hewn stone, with a psalm from the scriptures carved in its entrance. A merciful angel gazed gently down upon those who passed within. Anyone would stand in awe of this place.

If one ventured deep into the forests and mountains, at times it was possible to see great trees reaching up to the heavens. Most were the residences of local gods or spirits, and being in their midst was awe-inspiring.

However, what they saw in front of them now was not some tree growing tall by some unknown power in some unknown place.. it was a church built by humans, in Gerube, with their own hands, on their own land. And what resided in that church was no god with sharp fangs and claws to eat them, but a merciful god in their own form.

By comparison, the pagans praying to waterfalls and springs, worshiping toads, and interpreting the cries of beasts as messages from spirits seemed barbaric.. the type of people one shouldn't associate with.

Even with Holo beside him, Lawrence couldn't help but think this way. If his ear wasn't violently pulled by her in her fury, he would have stood there, forever caught in its atmosphere.

“Come on, let's go in.”

Many had indeed gathered in front of the church. Lawrence listened carefully, but heard nothing but talk of the Narwhale. It was said that nothing could stop the flow of information.. someone must have already leaked news of the Narwhale.

Still, there were soldiers armed with spears posted at the church entrance to hold back the crowd. No one would be able to see the Narwhale. Holo dragged Lawrence through the crowd, then up the stairs up to the doors, before they were stopped by those spears.

“The Church is busy. No one may attend.”

Power is an amazing thing.

“We come from the Rowen guild, under the authority of Mr. Keeman.”

The two guards exchanged glances, understanding the trouble they would be in if they turned Lawrence away. They dutifully lowered their spears and asked them to pass by quickly.

“Our thanks.”

Lawrence smiled at the men, then grabbed Holo, who was still angry. The three of them entered, with Cole nervously clutching Holo's sleeve.

“It's so quiet..”

It was called a church, but it was large enough to be a castle. And not some castle in the middle of nowhere, a dark and narrow place crawling with pigs and sheep.. a castle in the middle of a city.

Past the entrance they saw a round and colorful ceiling with a biblical scene painted on it, as well as strange creatures of myth to demonstrate that this place was not ordinary carved in the columns and beams. The few windows necessitated many candles; expensive beeswax candles, no less, to prevent the paintings from being stained black.

The three of them turned around, and saw the crowd of people trying to get past the guards. Indeed, if they received special treatment like this all the time, then it was easy to see why religious leaders and the elite were so stuck up.

“It should be deeper inside.”

Holo should be correct. Even a church this grand shared the same fundamental layout as any other. If they continued along this corridor, they should enter it's sanctuary. Any holy relics should be on or beneath the altar.

Holo pressed on, not waiting for Lawrence. It almost seemed as though she was being beckoning by something. As her hand reached out to the grandly-decorated door-

“Who's there?!”

A sharp voice suddenly shocked her. It wasn't like her to be that careless. She must have been preoccupied by thoughts of the legendary Narwhale, of it's life-extending flesh, and the fact that what she had been dreaming of was nearly within her grasp.

“Who are you?! Guards!”

It was a thin man with a crooked back and a large nose, dressed in white robes. His careworn face revealed him to be a clergyman, despite having a voice like a dying chicken.

“Apologies. We come referred by Mr. Keeman of the Rowen Trading Guild.”

Lawrence intentionally reported Keeman's name before introducing himself. He didn't wait for a reply before continuing.

“It seems you weren't informed.”

No-one enjoyed ritualistic discipline and formalities more than the Church. But social bonds were even stronger than written rules.

“What? From Rowen? Oh, please pardon my impoliteness.”

The man instantly calmed himself and waved away the guards who were en route. They reacted as if they had already forgotten the disturbance – they were probably accustomed to such things.

“Hmph. I am Sean Natalley, assistant priest of this church.”

“I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Guild, and there are my partners..”

“Holo.”

“Todd Cole.”

A merchant, a nun-like girl, and a boy in ragged clothes.. an amazing group to behold. But to someone living in a church their entire lives, just about everything from the outside world should be a surprise. And yet somehow, he wasn't surprised.

“I see. You have come to pray?”

No one spoke more transparently than clergymen. Lawrence coughed.

“No, we're here to see the Narwhale.”

“Oh..”

The assistant priest eyed him.. probably judging just how much of a donation he could offer.

“Will you not tell me your aim?”

He didn't wait for a reply, but continued.

“It is yet to be determined whether that thing back there is good or ill. All things are made by the Lord, of course, but this one is very strange, so much so that the priest is praying for the Lord's counsel. So even if you come referred by Mr. Keeman....”

Holo was accustomed to long conversations, but her patience was at its limit. With no other

choice, Lawrence smiled and walked to Natalley. He placed one hand inside his jacket and spoke.

“Well, actually, Mr. Keeman sent me bring words of greeting to you, Mr. Natalley.”

His free hand then took Mr. Natalley's, as though paying him reverence.

“Your words have been received.”

Natalley shook it off easily, and coughed.

“Though that thing is being identified, I can bend the rules and permit you to see it, should you truly wish.”

“Our sincere thanks.”

Lawrence gave exaggerated thanks, to which Natalley happily nodded while walking to the door Holo was still in front of. He then pushed that door open.

“I’ll attend to my studies, since I’m prohibited from looking upon it directly”

He was either too nervous to gaze upon the Narwhale, or too shamed to walk into the sanctuary having been bribed. Regardless of which it was, Lawrence smiled at Holo.. not for having charmed the priest, but so she would continue into the sanctuary. While the door had been closed, she was impatient to enter.. and yet now she retreated.

“Quickly now.”

Lawrence whispered to her while pushing her in. Holo once wanted to find the Narwhale so that someone could eat it. Was it the friend she mentioned in Pasloe village, where she had lived for centuries, or another friend she had journeyed with before that?

Sadly, she had failed, and that person must have perished. Had she returned in time to witness their dying breath? Or had they died along the journey? In any case, based on the expression she now wore, Holo hadn't smiled when they said goodbye, but perhaps her friend had.

“What the..”

Cole murmured to himself. There was a path of stone plates extending past hundreds of wooden benches. A carpet of washed-out color lay upon it like a road to the heavens. At its far end was an image of the Lord formed with colorful pieces of glass on a high wall. Angels also adorned that wall, as if singing their praises to the Lord.

Beneath that sight there lay an altar, and beneath that a large coffin. They were still far away, but could still partly see the monstrous form within. The coffin was filled with water, and the

legendary creature thrashed and splashed about inside it. The knocking sounds they heard might be it's horn striking the coffin walls.



“It's real..”

All three of them paused at the same time. It was said that curiosity killed the cat, and now it seemed that merchant curiosity could even kill the gods. But none of them moved closer. Eating its flesh would grant unending life.. they could now understand how such a myth might come to be.

“Wanna get closer?”

Lawrence placed his hand on Holo's shoulder. She shivered in shock and turned her face to his.

“..”

She then quietly shook her head and turned back. She watched the Narwhale solemnly, as if saying goodbye to her past.

“Is.. is it a god?”

Cole quietly asked his question, still holding Holo's sleeve, and now also unconsciously holding Lawrence's jacket.

“Who knows.. what do you think?”

Lawrence answered by passing the question to Holo, who seemed displeased. She probably hadn't wanted to be asked, but there wasn't anyone else who could answer.

“At the very least it is natural. Things living outside the circle of life have a distinct smell. It does not.”

Holo turned to face them as they listened. Her expression was almost painfully lonely. Cole took her meaning and nervously tried to find something to say to lift her spirits, but she put her hand on his head.

“I jest.”

Her face made it obvious that she wasn't jesting, however, especially when she turned away.

“Well, given its size and the number of guards..”

She spoke softly as she gazed around wistfully. In retrospect, it was clear why she suggested to barge in and take the Narwhale when she was encouraging Lawrence.

“I thought this was only a hypothetical plan?”

Holo smiled maliciously at his question and tilted her head.

“If your fear only applied to hypothetical situations, my life would be easier.”

“..”

Indeed, there was nothing wrong with knowing they could steal the Narwhale at any time.

“The problem is knowing where to strike.”

“Won't the main entrance do?”

“If the door was closed, they might become suspicious.”

He recalled that the doors were reinforced with metal bands bolted onto them. A church actually stored many valuable items, and in times of war it would be the first place attacked and the last place in which the defenders could make a stand.

The front entrance must have been built to withstand siege equipment.. it could be a daunting task even for Holo.

“How about going through there?”

Cole pointed to the stained-glass window looming above the Narwhale. It was designed to let in light, and seemed about large enough for Holo's substantial wolf form.

“We'll be cursed.”

Holo purred as he spoke, as if she found the idea funny.

“Ho, ho.. but breaking *that* and jumping in? Surely that would feel fantastic.”

What was even more awful was the fact it didn't sound like she was joking. But thinking it over, Lawrence still found risks.

“It seems to be our only option.. but the glass wasn't designed under consideration that it might be broken. If we're not careful it could end badly.”

“Hm?”

Despite chuckling, Holo and Cole turned to face him as he explained.

“This place is so huge they couldn't build it out of stone.. it would have collapsed under its own weight. So they made it out of glass.. look, you can see the iron poles that support the upper structure.. if we break in that way the entire roof might collapse.”

All large churches had grand ceilings of stained glass.. but if people learned that was the real reason why, they would all be disappointed. Even the Lord's palace had to follow the rules of reality.

"We will figure that out when we must."

She paused and sighed.

"If you worked harder, I would not have to take all of the risk."

It was absolutely true.. and so disgraceful that Lawrence could only turn away. Cole smiled as if to tell him "she'll be fine" before she continued.

"Alright, we should leave before the priests begin to suspect us."

"Mhm."

"Okay."

They answered simultaneously.

But Lawrence was still concerned.

"Are you sure you don't want a closer look?"

Cole seemed frightened and said "I'm fine."

Holo looked troubled but said "I care not."

In any case, they both seemed fearful; even Lawrence felt a strange aura coming from the horned creature which made it difficult to approach. That was likely why Natalley had excused himself. They had only heard of the Narwhale in myths, where it was said that eating its flesh granted eternal life and drinking its powered horn in a potion could cure any disease. But it was real.. and clearly grand enough to suit its myth.

And so, they had one more decision to make. They had explored how Holo could invade this place – now they had to decide when. Lawrence thanked Natalley as he closed the doors to the sanctuary.

"Its appearance is fit for its myth.. it must surely capture people's hearts."

Natalley turned and faced him with a fearful expression.

"Horrible, isn't it?"

The church would also be in danger since the Narwhale was here. They claimed to be under their Lord's protection so people wouldn't attack them, but there were many with no respect for their Lord. To monetize a living myth like the Narwhale, and treat it like any other commodity.. they had such nerve that it wasn't an understatement to consider *them* otherworldly.

When they were back on the road outside, Lawrence finally took a deep breath.

“But..”

He stood tall and looked directly at Holo, whose eyes gazed at him innocently.

“I do have you as my prisoner.”

Holo couldn't really read minds, since she couldn't detect topic changes. But the Wisewolf still caught his main point after a moment. Cole, however, was surprised at the confession, even if Holo just smiled at them.

“There is nothing to fear anymore, is there?”

As she spoke she moved her body in closer as they passed through the crowd. She then snuck her hand into his, as indeed there was nothing more frightening than that.

“Well, looks like the Wisewolf got it right again.”

Cole nodded, alternated his gaze between them, then nodded again.

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By the time Keeman came knocking on their door, it was evening and they had just settled down for dinner. The meal was fantastic, making Holo very happy. Cole nearly died from eating too quickly and having food go down the wrong pipe.

The fact that Keeman opted to disturb them during dinner time showed that he perhaps didn't consider them fools. Since, if he wanted to take them by surprise, he would have disturbed them when they just woke up, or when they were groggy after a meal.

“Care to join us?”

Lawrence asked, as he brushed off the breadcrumbs off his hands, and Keeman laughed before lifting his own hand up and replying.

“No thank you. But would you join me outside for a moment, Mr. Lawrence?”

Lawrence had no plans to disagree. After signaling to Holo and Cole with his eyes, he rose and

followed Keeman. He felt relieved that Cole was there to keep Holo company; it really helped. He wondered how shocked she would be to learn that.

“I’ll just cut to the chase.”

Keeman spoke directly to Lawrence after they entered another room in the inn. Lawrence wondered if it was a storage room, but perhaps it was a place Keeman had set aside for deliberations. Many crates and maps littered the room under the weak candlelight. All of the maps were in a language Lawrence was unfamiliar with.

“We want you, Mr. Lawrence, to act as our messenger.”

Was he saying “we” just to scare Lawrence, or was there someone else? Lawrence decided to stand tall to reply, like a proper merchant.

“May I know why?”

“Of course. Frankly, we had another person in mind.”

Of course.

“We had considered D’Jean’s Company.. you’ve heard of them before, correct? Ted Reynolds was to be our messenger, but the reason we didn’t choose him was that-”

“He wanted to escape the exploitation of the northerners.”

Keeman nodded before continuing.

“He wanted to establish contact with us, and using him would give us access to the copper trade, so he was our first choice. He even had a good relationship with the Boland family. You know the copper trade down the Roam river is under his control.. that’s possibly due to his ties with that wolf.”

Lawrence recalled his run-in with Eve over salt. If D’Jean was shipping coins to the Winfield Kingdom, it wasn’t odd for him to ship salt statues for them on the way back. In that case, it was possible there was another reason for his visit last night.

Reynolds had his own plans; he must have been scheming for a long time about how to maximize his profits. He had expected Keeman and his allies to come to him, but that didn’t happen. He must have then realized that they had found a better candidate. Having planned to profit from this feud between the North and the South, it wouldn’t be strange if his unseemly behavior was part of his strategy. The pitiful appearance of his back perhaps revealed how pathetic he found himself for stooping to such things.

“We wish to gain sole ownership of the northern lands by using the Narwhale.”

“But it would require great care to make sure they don't use this situation to grab control of the whole city.”

Keeman nodded. He was on the same page as Eve. That wasn't to say that Eve was ahead of him, or that he had a weaker imagination. When one's opponent wasn't trustworthy, but had to sit across the same table at a discussion, it was most logical for things to follow that path. Lawrence finally understood why Eve had tried to find him.

In this situation, it was a major concern if anyone involved didn't know what linked the north and south together. They could only be on equal footing because they were in the same situation, where their mediator could equally betray both of them. This was, as it turned out, a battle to win over their mediator.

“One man in a landowner's family is attracted to the leader of the Boland family; we must make use of this. It would be optimal for us and her if she doesn't betray us, but we cannot be certain of that.”

Lawrence also knew Eve had a complicated situation that was beyond his full understanding.. it was as complicated as the recipes used by alchemists.

“The messenger could be on our side at a given time, then change to her side depending on the situation. We need that sort of mediator, otherwise that wolf would be too wary to deal with us. Of course, we have to make certain we'll ultimately win, so we wanted a truly secure plan.. but to our despair the goods we are dealing with could spoil at any moment.”

He was talking about the Narwhale, which was still alive.

“Then what exactly am I to do?”

Keeman coughed, and closed his eyes. He was likely going over the whole plan in his mind.

“It's simple: send messages for us. We don't trust her, nor does she trust us. However, we *do* trust you, Mr. Lawrence.. and so does she. Thus you just need to bring our offer to them. Our conditions, our price, the means of transaction, specific date, and specific procedures for escaping with the Narwhale that you need to tell her in person. Of course, we'll need her reply.”

“And my compensation?”

Keeman put on a proud smile revealing his canine teeth.

“After this I imagine the Rowen Guild will become the top-dogs among the southern companies. We'd kick aside Jeeda, the current owner, who just sits back and watches

everything. I would replace him, and the profits-”

He paused for dramatic effect like an actor.

“I’ll leave them to your imagination.”

To not haul goods on his own, or sell them in person, but rather use others to sell goods carried by others and just record profits in ledgers as an accountant. A totally different existence, going from a merchant to something almost alien. The profits would be so vast that Lawrence could barely see their edge.

“However, this is just a verbal contract. That way, the wolf still has a chance to sway you to her side, Mr. Lawrence.”

“Right, and she could well offer me realistic profits.”

If Eve could truly cheat everyone involved to get the Narwhale, being a fallen noble, she could then sell it to the highest bidder straight away. She could very well offer him a sea of gold coins to swim in.

“I don’t really wish to give her such leeway, but it’s the only way to get a chance at this deal in the first place. People just aren’t that powerful.”

Keeman’s words carried a lot of weight. They had already found out that the landowner’s son who had asked for Eve’s hand in marriage wouldn’t betray his family for himself. But things were different when his reason became Eve. When people had excuses, they became stronger and tougher. In the game of love, it was even quite common for the small potato to defeat the towering dragon.

“Very well, I understand my responsibility.”

Lawrence smiled, and Keeman smiled back. When dealing under the table, a smile signified the conclusion of a deal. That was because after a secret deal, in stories that were full of secrets and tension, bearded merchants would gloat in the candlelight.

“Good, however..”

“However?”

Hearing his question returned so straightforwardly, Keeman smiled like a naïve child.

“However, I suspected that I had you completely under my control. How.. hmm.. how is it that you recovered so quickly?”

Lawrence stared at the ground with a smile. Keeman was correct, Lawrence had been

completely under his spell in the branch office on the delta. Like a puppet, and to such a degree that even the puppet-master would feel embarrassed. So for the puppet to snatch back his soul so rapidly.. of course that should come as a surprise. But surely Keeman knew why, so seeing Lawrence just smile in silence, he continued.

“I’m sorry I asked you a stupid question.”

“Be it a merchant, knight, king or anyone else, they wouldn't be able to finish such a job on their own. Not even a priest.”

Merchants, knights and kings.. that was easy enough to understand. But why priests? Every great merchant, knight or king had an equally great wife or lover at his side. But a priest?

“They have their god.”

Lawrence kept smiling as he murmured. Just what could he accomplish with Holo at his side?

“We both walk a surface weaved from lies, so let's set out together.”

Keeman reached out his hand, and Lawrence accepted it. They shook hands.

“I can't just sit here idly doing nothing. Just tell the innkeeper when you wish to see me. We shan't eavesdrop, in the hopes that you'll also be honest.”

“Mhm.. since unfortunate incidents spring from suspicion and misunderstanding.”

Keeman nodded and rose. Unlike their first meeting in his office, he left the room together with Lawrence.

“Things should be settled by the day after tomorrow.”

He hid the word “frantically” beneath a smile.

“Then even if we can't find the nerve to sleep, we should be able to last to the end.”

Hearing Lawrence's reply, Keeman walked out smiling, with relaxed footsteps. No-one passing by would suspect that the two of them even knew each other. Lawrence stood alone in the corridor and muttered through a bitter smile.

“He never mentioned what the consequence for failure would be.”

This wasn't something vastly different from what Lawrence had done in the Church city of Ruvineigen, taking advantage of a shepherdess by emphasizing potential profits. Back then he had nearly collapsed with guilt, but what about now? Keeman acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Lawrence wasn't confident that he could act that way at all.

With Holo he had support; when things became untenable, she could force a fresh start. But that was only meant as reassurance, and furthermore he was required to earn a profit for himself in this situation - not merely to safely complete tasks.

Should he attack when they didn't suspect it? He had no choice.. at this point, he actually wanted to try it. Scratching his head, he walked down the hall into the darkness, his bitter smile spreading across his face to reveal his teeth.

Right now, he felt like reading a heroic epic.



Chapter 7

That night, despite his declaration, he found himself unable to sleep. It was likely that Keeman, being the central figure of the scheme, would spend the night planning proposals and laying groundwork, but Lawrence had to worry about being on their receiving end.

He knew he wasn't that skilled. In that situation, most merchants would seek information in order to take the lead.. but this time, Lawrence had no choice but to let himself be outclassed. In this case, outwitting his opponent would require a great deal of skill. He had limited time to come up with a plan, and only a vague understanding of things. He wasn't sure if there could be a positive outcome this time.

If it wasn't for Holo, he would have opted for self-preservation and become Keeman's pawn.. led by the nose, and ultimately abandoned. He laughed at himself and turned over. His bed was cold, being near the window, and when he lifted his head he could see the pale-blue moonlight seeping in through the window seams.

He had to tip his hat to Eve, now that he realized how great the gap was between them as merchants. Even someone like Keeman was challenging her, and Lawrence had jumped right in between them. He rolled over again and sighed.

There was no desire within him to turn back, but he was still nervous. The more he tried to sleep, the more awake he became. It seemed he was unsuited for these kinds of things. He laughed bitterly and decided to quench his thirst, then went outside to breathe the night air. The copper water-jug was ice-cold in the night air, but he took it with him as he walked through the silent inn.

The inn was constructed to encircle a garden, and in that garden was a well. He had seen many such buildings in the south during his travels. Although he could of course tell which company or guild a building belonged to, their basic construction never differed much. That wasn't because everyone had decided on a common architecture, but rather because carpenters and stonemasons worked everywhere. Before his travels took him to distant lands, he had even assumed these styles to be used the world over.

He would never forget the surprise he felt when he first learned that wasn't true. Journeying helped broaden his perspective, but he always had to keep in mind just how narrow that perspective was. After experiencing this over the years, he'd come to realize just how miniscule he was in this vast world. There were an infinite number of people above him, and an infinite number below him.

There was always another able to do what he could do, and no matter what he realized there had already been someone who had realized it before him. He let the well's water-bucket drop

down, far into the opening that lay open to the sky beneath the pale blue moonlight. It was rare for things to go one's way, and most of the time they were being influenced by surrounding pressure.

This situation may have been caused by asking Eve about the wolf-god's bones, but its root cause was meeting her in Lenos.. and Holo was the reason they were in Lenos in the first place. Lawrence was indeed swimming toward his destination, but not through a lake; it was a fast-flowing river.

Upon retrieving the bucket, he stared at the moon's beautiful reflection within. It might be that he was recalling his troubled youth because, in this complex and overbearing situation, he disliked being a minor character. If he were a historian, he couldn't write himself as the lead.. that was probably Keeman or Eve. As his face distorted with a bitter smile, so too did the moon's reflection. Having concluded that this train of thought was stupid, he looked up and there, as expected, stood Holo.

"A fine night, is it not?"

She held her hands behind her back, smiling brightly as a town girl on a sunny day. He returned that smile, and gave a simple "yes".

"Just as the moon waxes and wanes, so does my mood."

She sighed as she poked her finger at the moon's reflection in the bucket.

"You left the room with a languished appearance, so I followed."

"Did I look like I needed someone to talk to?"

Rather than replying, she grinned.

"..perhaps"

It might be a sign of progress that she was letting him lead the conversation like this. She lifted the water jug he had left beside the well and fidgeted with it in her hands.

"I wished to speak with you about something."

"With me?"

"Is it time to reveal another secret technique for understanding human nature?"

She laughed silently at his joke, and sat on the edge of the well while clutching the cold jug.

"There is no need to say that out loud.. after all, with me grasping your heart all the time, you

surely know it by now?"

"I'll just go with 'perhaps'."

"A fine attitude."

She laughed, revealing her fangs, which then slowly receded like the tide as her smile vanished. She was a wolf of many expressions; like a stormy sea that, when viewed from afar, concealed many sharp rocks. When the tides drew back and revealed her true feelings, they likewise tended to be in the most unexpected places. How many times had Lawrence nearly been sunk, he wondered, as he roughly stroked her head.

"I.."

"Hmm?"

"I regret having spurred you on."

He sat beside her as she clutched the copper jug - which was probably ice cold - as though it warmed her.

"Well I'm actually thankful for that.. it's let me fight back against Keeman."

He wasn't lying, but her eyes wandered as if trying to discern whether his words were true. She finally looked down, and nodded.

"That is what I regret."

"Oh? Well.. if you hadn't let me, I suppose things might have gone over better.."

"That is not what I mean."

She shook her head and inhaled, then looked directly at him and spoke clearly.

"One as clever as you can do most anything, if they clearly see what is taking place around them. But all have their strengths and weaknesses, and I spurred you on despite knowing that this was something you are not suited for. I even knew you did not wish for this."

Lawrence was indeed heading straight into a conflict between town merchants, all skilled in the devious arts. However, it was a scenario he needed to prepare for if he was ever to become one of those town merchants himself. It wasn't something Holo needed to fret over. But as he opened his mouth to say so, she continued.

"In any event, if you truly had a spirit strong enough to argue with this lot, you would have used my abilities to their fullest."

In his place Eve or Keeman would have done exactly that.. used Holo at the outset to gain whatever lead they could. After all, viewing the situation logically, she was the strongest weapon available.

"You seem to prefer a flow that is.. er.. reliable. Steady and slow. And I also feel that suits you better. Yet from my actions, what lies ahead of you is the exact opposite. Am I not correct?"

She was correct. He only had to consider his earnings before he met her. They steadily rose, and there was a part of him that was content with this gradual rate of increase. It wouldn't do to forget why he wanted to have a shop in the first place: it wasn't for something as overwrought as gripping the very world in his hands, but simply to be a part of a small town where he could feel he belonged.

"But it wounds me to know that you didn't consider me suited for these kinds of things."

Her ears twitched under her hood. She slowly raised her head.

"Yet you are not suited to them, are you?"

"When you look at me that way, there's just no way I can get upset."

He was smiling bitterly, but as he watched his breath drift upward to the moon, that white mist seemed to take the bitterness with it.

"But, I'm not going to back down."

While he made his declaration, she watched him as if she had inhaled some of the bitterness he just released.

"Because you make those faces."

"Ugh..."

She didn't hide her anxiety even while he poked her forehead. By all rights, she seemed to genuinely regret pushing him into this. Every time he was in trouble, she joked that she'd be troubled if he was a weak merchant, yet in spite of that she genuinely did seem to worry for him. But there seemed to be reasons other than the fact that he was unsuited for such situations.

"The fact that you're in this much regret must mean that you're expecting greatness from me, correct?"

Her anger over him fretting and coming to his conclusions was a flaw that she herself shared. But it seemed with the Wisewolf, being quiet was even more effective than spelling it out in

words. After a time, she seemed to have given up.

"It appears that you plan on writing about our journey together.."

"Huh?"

He remembered having said something to that effect, but failed to see a connection. She glared at him angrily; she must have wanted him to understand her already. But she ultimately seemed to acknowledge the limits of his brain and continued with a sulk.

"But that makes you the protagonist, does it not? I want the lead character to act like one. Because I.. I only play a supporting role.. or so it feels, at least.."

In the ancient myth about the Moon-Hunting Bear that had destroyed her home, not only did Holo play a supporting role, but she was off-stage entirely. Her manner as she dangled her legs, seated on the well, appeared entirely childish.

"But.. that is entirely my ego. If you rush into danger, or wander to the garden at night with a lonely look, I will be hurt."

She placed her hand on her chest and and winced as though she was in pain. He gave her right cheek a light pinch.

"Well I do take your meaning, but.."

He had no choice but to use a forceful tone with her as she angrily rubbed her cheek.

"When you put it that way, it's just more reason for me to not back down."

Because that meant she had expectations of him. If that was true there was no way he could back down.

"That is why I did not wish to tell you.."

"Because I'd become even more stubborn?"

When he laughed she punched his side and looked at him with such serious eyes that it was clear she wasn't joking.

"You do realize how costly it will be to ignore my care?"

".."

He was aware of her reasons and how they indirectly revealed her expectations. He paused for quite some time before nodding. He was clearly not fooling around, but was still on the

receiving end of an interrogative stare.

"Do you truly understand?"

"I believe so."

"Truly?"

It was her persistence that finally helped him understand. What role did a character play in a story where they wished for another to be the lead? To fulfil that role, they simply had to wish and worry, and in that sense it was a comfortable role. Unfortunately for Lawrence, through the ages men had always been weak against that kind of character.

"Of course."

After confirming his reply he hugged her warm body in the moonlight. Her tail wagged happily beneath her robes. This world was, in a sense, a stage where everyone wanted to be the lead actor. But things didn't go according to any one person's whims, so becoming the lead was no small task. However, it was easier to try when someone put their faith in you. Holo stood in his arms, looking as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Just that alone was enough to convince him that he had no regrets.

"Come, let's fill the jug and head back. It's cold outside."

He realized that saying so was tantamount to trying to conceal his embarrassment. As he took the jug from her with his right hand and filled it with water, she held his left hand and giggled as if she had been tickled. He might be being spurred on, but it was clearly because this situation was related to the problem of the wolf-god's bones, making this her wish.

The following day, Lawrence was summoned by Keeman after lunch. As he left the room, it was impressive that the one who was most nervous was, in fact, Cole.

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The Rowen Trading Guild, Gerube Branch Office, was a building representing the interests of its membership in Gerube, a vital trading hub linking the pagan and religious territories. Here met many thousands of merchants, as well as the managers who oversaw all of them. It would be impossible to outwit every one of them, but what Lawrence would do, under Keeman's orders, was outwit other such guilds and the northern landowners.

If Eve didn't betray him or the guild, all would be well. That was the conclusion of the previous night's deliberations between Keeman and the other merchants, who had already finished laying the groundwork. What Lawrence was actually expected to do was not too difficult. He was to gain the trust of a lone wolf wildcard, Eve, and thus ensure that things went smoothly.

That was it.

"You're certain that you don't have to take your companion with you?"

"I am."

The office was busy, so he only had a few minutes to speak with Keeman before departing. Keeman was the manager of the branch office, and presently involved in negotiations, so he was wearing fine clothes with a starched collar.

Since the negotiations - between the northern landowners and southern merchants - were taking place across the river on the delta, leaving Holo and Cole behind at the inn might be viewed as sign that they were hostages. Perhaps that was why they asked if they should come along.

"So, you will tell Madam Boland what we discussed earlier. Things have become rather complex, so making decisions on your own will cause details to be overlooked and slip between the cracks."

Keeman stared into his eyes, and Lawrence nodded to reassure him. Even if he saw the full picture, he probably couldn't understand it all.. he couldn't even win politically against Holo or Cole. Keeman couldn't run along mountain trails for weeks at a time, subsisting on rainwater and crusty rye bread, anymore than Lawrence could do his job.

Lawrence would be safe if he followed Keeman's advice. The only decision Lawrence could make on his own was a final one, when things had become focused enough for him to make a judgment. Keeman was eager to continue speaking, but a knock on his door ended their discussion. The delegates would be departing in a group, and it was time.

"Understood?"

Having received his orders, Lawrence left the room and passed the people who were now entering. It felt tense inside the building, as though a battle were imminent; especially at the canteen on the ground floor. But this side of the conflict felt the tension of anticipated victory, since the goddess of victory – the Narwhale - was on their side. They were likely discussing who would come out on top.

The word on the street was that the guild who had captured the northern boat that had caught the Narwhale, was likely to be that victor. Even the members of the Rowen Trade Guild were muttering that it would be difficult to gain the upper hand in the negotiations. Of course that didn't mean they were giving up, and those merchants in the corner who were motioning as though rowing a boat or who were sleeping were likely the ones who had sided with the south the fastest.

Knights and mercenaries were too realistic to talk about things like shares of profits that were out of their reach. But merchants liked to count chickens before they hatched, and must have fiercely argued over the share of profits they had yet to make.. perhaps they were still arguing.

There were carriages waiting outside the guild-house for Director Jeeda and Keeman, and between them were spies dressed as beggars who were gathering information for their employers, who were merchants. Lawrence remembered what Eve had called this back in Lenos, the town of fur and lumber: a trade war. The fact that this atmosphere excited him wasn't because he was facing a huge business deal. It was probably because he was born a male, and so found such things intrinsically appealing.

“Gentlemen!”

All chatter in the guild-house immediately ceased at this interruption. The center of attention became Director Jeeda; a tall, thin and balding old man. Keeman claimed he was an opportunist, but anyone in a position like his - of avoiding confusion - could be considered one. Unlike Keeman, who dressed as nobility, Jeeda wore loose-fitting clothes befitting an aged man. His deep blue eyes, as they surveyed his patrons, seemed able to peer a hundred years into the future.

“In the name of our patron Saint Lambardos, let our guild be victorious!”

“To victory!”

In response to their cheers, the director and his entourage left the guild-house. Not once did Keeman glance at Lawrence, instead speaking with many others right up until the moment he exited the guild and sat in his carriage. As he watched, Lawrence felt his hand instinctively rise to his chest. It was surprising indeed that he was part of a plan that could overturn the situation. Were Holo beside him, she might have laughed and said he was a merchant to the core. No, she definitely would have laughed, since he was laughing himself.

Crossing the river was no longer prohibited, so after the director's entourage left so did many in positions similar to Lawrence – those relaying unofficial orders and those who were to stand by and watch. Lawrence mingled in the back of the crowd and they walked toward the river.

From what he could see of the people leaving the trade guilds and companies, the road took on a strange atmosphere. Business was of course being conducted as usual, and not everyone in town was a merchant. But the way countless merchants were heading north reminded him of the northern campaigns. Church bells rang, and the sound of marching resounded like a drum beat. Even those rowing boats who didn't usually treat passengers as guests were being silent and obedient.

Many bystanders stood on the bank, with many soldiers watching over them with spears or axes. A weak-willed merchant, flung about in the boat and spat up onto the pier, would seem

overwhelmed with his knees knocking. But nobody would laugh at him. Everyone moved in silence toward the delta.

Those unrelated to business stared as if watching something strange unfold. In ancient times, a fight over land was fought with swords and so was quite easy to understand. But these days such battles were decided with parchment and ink, so it wasn't much of a surprise that onlookers would believe sorcery was afoot. Even Lawrence agreed with that estimation.

The fact was that money seemed to appear after talks of deals, similar to how a sorcerer might summon a demon with a magic circle. It was obvious why the Church was forceful with merchants who pushed relentlessly to make money. The business of merchants seemed like it was aided by mysterious demons.

No one was in the lead; the crowd simply moved as if flowing. They all made their way to the Stream of Gold, where the most expensive items on the delta were traded. On the tables there lay parchments detailing many expensive goods that were so expensive they couldn't be traded for money.. and perhaps not even power, prestige or pride.

Those like Lawrence, merchant underlings, were stopped; blocked by others so that only those who were executive merchants or dressed well could pass. Similarly, those from the north arrived and were seated. On both sides it appeared as though the people were accustomed to issuing orders by gesturing with their chins, like some kind of meeting between wise men of yore.

But the side that was clearly dominating was the southerners. Their clothing, retainers, and how they carried themselves practically smelled of money and power. In comparison all the northerners had was their dignity, which they seemed to precariously maintain by shouting loudly.

The southerners were assigned to seats and Director Jeeda, the delegate for the Rowen Trade Guild, was three seats to the right of the best-dressed man in the center. It seemed arranged such that their shares in the profits were correlated with their seating positions. Of course the northerners wouldn't know that, but Lawrence couldn't help but wonder how they would feel to sit in front of those who were now selfishly planning to divvy up their fortunes.

Still, if the deal proceeded as it did now, it wasn't clear what profits the Rowen Trade Guild would receive. All Lawrence knew at this juncture was that Director Jeeda would earn all the accolades, and those under him would earn relatively little. *If only the profits would be evenly shared instead..* He couldn't help but laugh at thinking so naively, even if it was the way business was supposed to be conducted.

Finally, the northerners were all seated. Behind them were merchants who seemed to be their retainers, whispering into their ears. This seemed to be a last-ditch strategy session, but they were all still wearing serious expressions. But unexpectedly, on the northerners' side, behind

the best-dressed man in the middle was a person that Lawrence was familiar with.

Ted Reynolds, of D'Jean Company. He wore what must be official's clothing in Gerube; a pointed hat like everyone around him. In other circumstances he might have been the mediator in Keemans' plan to finish off the northerners.. it was quite a sobering thought.

If Keeman had chosen Reynolds, would Reynolds have then betrayed Lawrence? Lawrence had no answer, but as he watched Reynolds from afar he felt as if their eyes suddenly met. He was being watched by countless others, so it was unlikely he would have singled Lawrence out. Clearly this was a sign that Lawrence was growing nervous and self-conscious.

No, he certainly *was* nervous.. Eve wasn't present. In Keeman's estimation, she wouldn't be there center-stage, and that seemed correct. Her job was to conduct deals under the table. Perhaps she was now being choked to death with passionate love letters from those desperately trying to outwit everyone else to capture the profit. Lawrence spun around on his heel and left the crowd.. he had to run and present her with flowers of his own.

Not long after that, what sounded like the declaration commencing the negotiations rang out behind him. A southern voice gave the declaration, making it obvious that the meeting was really just a ritual; a formality. But rituals were like prayers: acts to appeal to the gods. Lawrence grew fearful, tightening his collar at the prospect of what those at that table might now be praying for.

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## Chapter 8

The path to finding Eve was as open-ended as the path to the summit of a hill. But Lawrence suspected he would find her at the first inn they had stayed at, where Holo had become drunk and had that long discussion with him and Cole. The ground floor was empty, but the owner had no reason to be concerned – someone from the north had rented the entire inn. All the hotels on the delta would be booked like this today.

Lawrence handed the innkeeper a weathered coin with the profile of a certain financially-troubled king on it. In return the innkeeper set an empty beer glass down on the counter in front of Lawrence, and pointed him in the direction of the stairs.

“I appreciate you taking care of this for me.”

Clearly Lawrence was being instructed to take the glass with him upstairs, so he did so. There he saw a merchant speaking with someone on the far end of the hallway. Lawrence would have ignored him, if not for that useful merchant's talent to never forget a face. The man had put on a false beard and stuffed his clothing to alter his figure, but he was clearly one of Eve's lookouts. As Lawrence turned to face him again, he was met with a sharp gaze.

“How's business?”

Lawrence overcame his initial hesitation and walked up to the man fearlessly. The stranger he was speaking with opened his mouth, and Lawrence realized that they were expecting some sort of secret pass-phrase. The reason for the empty beer glass became apparent; Lawrence turned that empty glass over and spoke.

“My business is so bad lately that I can't even afford a beer.”

A smile appeared on the stranger's face, and he pointed at the door behind him. All of the nails on his hands were misshapen – clearly he wasn't someone meant for physical labor. Lawrence returned a warm smile and knocked on the door, pushing it open and entering when he heard a response. Upon stepping in he was struck by the smell of ink, and something else pungent enough to make him frown; an old man in one corner of the room was silently melting wax for stamps.

“Have you any idea how disappointing it is to see you here?”

Being physically and mentally tired were two different things. The exhaustion of reading was written plainly on Eve's face, and both of her hands were busy keeping her head from falling into the stack of letters and books on the desk. Lawrence replied.



“Was it time for your nap?”

“Yes it was. People everywhere are talking in their sleep these days.”

There were stacks of papers and letters around his feet, and he couldn't help but steal a glance at them. Two threat letters, three more preaching against the “alliance” of the north and south sides, three more invitations for Eve to work for others, and even one inviting her to flee the country. He picked up that last, and funniest, letter and set it in front of her.

“That one was from a time when I became the target of pirates while on a ship with several pilgrims wishing to cross the channel.”

Their conversation was off to a meaningless and innocent start, as she gracefully folding the letter.

“Those pilgrims did of course pray as they cowered, but after several sailors were killed what do you think happened?”

“I've no idea.”

Hearing his reply, Eve happily continued.

“They started to take off their clothes and.. well, you know. It was then that I realized just how 'incredible' and 'tough' humans really are.”

A poet had indeed once said that the looming threat of death was the most potent aphrodisiac known to man. But her statement begged a question.

“And what was Ms. Eve doing in the meantime?”

She gently tossed the letter onto the hearth.

“I was busy sifting through their luggage to try and find the money I would need to buy my life back.”

Her dry lips remained still.. only her eyes were smiling. Lawrence shrugged and finally handed her the letter he had been asked to deliver.

“It was requested of me to give you this.”

“How unnecessary.”

Hearing her answer, the old man stirring the molten wax looked up at them. But when she flicked her finger, he averted his gaze back to the wax. Either he was deaf, or they were making Lawrence think so, to fool him into a false sense of security.

“All I need to know is who's side you're on. That's all.”

“Or, more accurately, if I'll do what you say in the end, right?”

Her eyes-only smile reappeared, but she didn't reply. Instead she reached her hand out to his, received the letter, and opened it as though it were just another typical letter.

“Hmm, it's rather eerie when its this close to expectations. It's as if someone revealed our entire secret meeting in detail.”

“Surely you jest.”

Seeing him reply with his most sincere business smile, Eve, looking bored, casually set the letter down on the desk.

“So, he is ready to negotiate..”

At least it seemed that she would spend more time on his letter than the others.

“What do you think?”

She closed her eyes while asking. It was too early for bargaining.

“Well, since Madam Eve has received my delivery, my job is half-over.”

“The landowners trade the delta for the Narwhale, I share some profit with those who betrayed the northerners and your party gets the rest.

“A conclusion that should leave everyone satisfied.”

Eve sighed at his response and rubbed the corners of her eyes.

“It's impossible to see the hearts of others. It's quite a pity.”

Those who trusted that the trade would be a smooth one, and placed their faith in their opponents, must have never been betrayed before. No one should be able to trust things would go smoothly if they themselves were cheating.

“Do you know who Keeman is connected to?”

She wasn't testing Lawrence, it was an honest question.

“I've no clue.”

“Realistically, is it possible to secretly steal the Narwhale?”

“You'd have to threaten or bribe the soldiers who are on watch.”

“But the contract for the exchange will be signed by the landowner's son, and he has no actual rights to the land. It might prove entirely worthless. What will Keeman do about that?”

“The third generation has already spoken with the landowners. They're all adults. The power of attorney is shared by the council, Church and landowners.. so once they find somewhere they can all voice their opinions, everything should be fine. Or so he says.”

“I see. And you believe what he says?”

Eve looked down her nose at Lawrence, like a noble snubbing someone of lower status. She spoke as if she was sure Keeman had laid a trap.

“I don't believe his words, but I do obey his orders.”

She turned away.

“A flawless answer. But still not enough to bridge the gulf between us.”

Was she implying that she couldn't accept Keeman's compromise? Lawrence had no trust in Keeman, but didn't think it was such a bad deal for Eve.

“What's the best choice for you?”

“I already told you. Everybody betrays each other, and I get to take all the profits.”

“How can you-”

Lawrence nervously shut his mouth to keep from saying the rest. She smiled as though encouraging him to continue.

“Why would you stick to such a childish perspective?”

This was the sort of deal which, if offered to Keeman, would be accepted immediately; he would be delighted. Why was she being so stubbornly unwilling to trust him? It was strange to Lawrence no matter how he looked at it. If she felt he couldn't be trusted, she would have rejected him immediately. Maybe she just wanted all of the profits? That level of childishness was like a bad joke.

“Childish? Yeah, I suppose I am acting like a child.”

She smiled and breathed in deeply. She exhaled strongly enough to shift the papers on her

desk.

“A child burned by flame will become fearful of fire.”

“..if that were true, then all merchants could do is shrivel away in empty rooms.”

Merchants had no choice but to live their lives seeking profits, no matter what harm or deceit they came by. Surely Eve was the embodiment of that philosophy. Wasn't it proof enough that she was now in a position to determine those who would end up controlling the vital trading port of Gerube? She replied to his angry challenge with a withering sigh.

“I never intended to become a merchant.”

“Ugh.”

Lawrence shrank away, stunned at her feeble voice. She then collapsed on the table as if exhausted, sending pieces of paper flying in every direction. The old man who might be deaf jumped to his feet, but Eve turned to him and smiled.

“It's a bad joke, isn't it? Just by playing with paper and uttering a few words we can purchase something that's worth more than one's life.”

She took a letter in her hands, and dropped it, slowly turning her gaze toward Lawrence

“Have you ever been betrayed by someone you really trusted? How can anyone trust again after something like that? I can only trust myself now, and my own ability to betray others.”

A beast's fangs were useful for both offense and defense. Eve kept hers razor sharp. Was it the only way she felt she could defend herself?

“When we had our fight, you asked me didn't you.. what lies at the end of this drive to quench my constant thirst? And I gave you an answer, didn't I? What I'm looking forward to..”

She closed her eyes slowly, and then opened them again just as slowly.

“I'm looking forward to a time, someday, when everyone will be satisfied. A world without worry or pain.”

Lawrence could only step back in shock. To constantly betray others, while seeking a life without worry or pain? It was like staring at the darkest recesses of the human spirit. And she wasn't acting. It wasn't even a trap. She slowly lifted her body from the table and, as if troubled, leaned back in her chair before calmly continuing.

“Alright. I'll accept Keeman's proposal. And you'll believe what I said.”

She paused for a moment, as a snake-like smile spread across her face.

“Tell him”

Her response was pure genius. How could Lawrence trust those words? How could he possibly report this back to Keeman? He suppressed his feeling of nausea at the endless possibilities and doubts, and slowly straightened his back. But it was her ultimate response, and he had to report it back to him.

“..very well.”

He politely bowed before turning to leave the room. He couldn't help but compare Eve to the many-handed sea-monsters that dragged boats to the bottom of the ocean and gave sailors nightmares. If she couldn't bring herself to trust anyone, of course she could betray everyone for her own gain.

But during a trade there could be no gain without mutual interest.. so who would she end up trusting? Who would end up the loser in this trade? As he placed his hand on the door handle, she struck up a final conversation.

“Look, how about you join me?”

She stared at him with an entirely blank expression. She seemed both serious and to want to trick him, at the same time.

“You mean, join you as though I've been fooled?”

“Indeed.”

“I don't want to feel like I've been fooled.”

She smiled as he finished talking. He didn't reply to what she said next.

“Look, you have someone waiting for your return, right? But I...”

He didn't reply: if he had, he would be trapped. Mermaid's songs were far too good at messing with a man's mind. He quickly walked down the hallway and went downstairs, all the while feeling as if her eyes were glued to his back.

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The way to contact Keeman was through a messenger. They would meet two streets away from the Stream of Gold, in a busy alley full of stalls. The best place to hide a tree was in a forest. But using such a roundabout method wasn't just because it would be difficult to meet with Keeman directly; there should be another reason.

He had been strictly ordered to tell Eve only what he was told to say. This was probably to prevent a scenario where she won him over and sent Lawrence back with misinformation. Lawrence had to admit it was a wise choice to play it safe like that. It was impossible for him to accurately relay his conversation with Eve – which parts of their conversation were true, and which were lies? His own trust in people was wavering.

“The boss said, ‘understood.’”

The messenger who relayed his message and brought back the reply was a short hunchback.

“Then what are my follow-up orders?”

“The negotiations will take a break in a while. You’ll get further instructions then.”

“Understood.”

“Alright. I’ll contact you again at the next location we agreed on.”

The messenger left immediately; he probably had others to meet with. Keeman had certainly organized things well, but Lawrence still wasn't sure if it would be enough. The delta was always full of merchants, so wandering outsiders won't be noticed.. though there are limits for everything.

Any merchant wandering around now, or even just looking in a shop's window, would look suspicious. And the more suspicious one became, the more they would suspect.

If Holo was with him, Lawrence would be able to stay calm. But that just meant he was so used to her being at his side that he crumbled whenever she wasn't around. It brought a twisted smile to his face, as he walked to the next inn he had arranged to meet the messenger at.

“My apologies sir, we have no chairs left.”

There weren't many inns on the delta, and almost all of them were booked full. They were all packed today, so that was the kind of response Lawrence had expected to hear. He saw how crowded it was before he went in, realized they would soon run out of wine if they didn't start diluting it with water.. so he made sure to order stronger wine.

He didn't care if he had to lean against the wall to drink it. In fact if it gave him a better vantage point to overhear the other patrons, all the better. Even if he wasn't at the meeting it wouldn't be difficult to learn about it. It just wasn't something being kept a secret.

By the time he received his wine and took a few sips, he grasped nearly the entire situation. The northerners condemned the southerners for stealing their ship. But the southerners hid behind the excuse that they were only fulfilling the wish of the fishermen aboard that ship. It wasn't

the kind of scenario that could lead to a deal, just two sides talking past one another.

According to the loudest merchants in the inn, the northerners might leave by midnight and give up on their case to get back the Narwhale. They would probably settle for a share in the profits from its sale – and Lawrence agreed with that idea.

Should the elders of the south have wished to destroy the northerners, they only had to sell one of them the Narwhale and then, after seizing power and control, threaten them into submission. Since they hadn't done that, it meant the southerners still hoped to resolve this matter peacefully.

If they wanted to win the reins of control from the landowners, they needed to give them a reasonably beneficial offer - one that would leave the landowners feeling satisfied. The landowners were resisting because they had to retain their fame and power, and so needed enough chips to be able to bargain over the distribution of the gains from the expanding market on the delta.

That part of the deal wouldn't be decided at this meeting, only behind closed doors. The entire process wouldn't be exposed to Lawrence, and ironically, the people who had full grasp of the situation were the main characters in that farce: Keeman and Eve. Because he was caught between the two of them, Lawrence felt as if the entire situation with the Narwhale was at the center of this mess and, furthermore, that he was the main actor himself. But in reality they were only a small part of the bigger picture.

His role was that of a faceless messenger, and all he could do was smile about it. That, and he was under Eve's control right from the start. Not even drinking could calm him down enough to think about their last meeting. He felt deep down how simple it was to just deal with goods and their profits.

If he had lived in this world of risky battles, who knows what kind of a monster he would be. This world was so different; it harbored regrets and admiration. He was incredibly fortunate that Holo wasn't there to see him now. His bitter smile widened.

“Sir.”

A voice called to him as he stood there lost in thought, just as his glass of wine touched his lips again. Any merchant who would forget a face or voice wasn't worthy, especially when it was the distinctive voice of Keeman's messenger.

“You're quick.”

“Of course. Our boss' job requires quick decisions.”

The messenger's wrinkled face shifted to make way for a proud smile.

It was necessary to have connections to corroborate unreliable information – that's what merchants were for. And Keeman's role was to trade with places that took several months to visit by ship. At such distances, there was no way of telling whether gathered information was reliable or not; it was more likely that no information could be gathered in the first place.

In such situations, they had to come to decisions about trading goods of unimaginable value - that took a great deal of resolve. Furthermore, they needed a lot of courage to be able to wait patiently after making the decision, for several months, before the goods arrived.

This was how Keeman had the nerve to devise such a colossal plan to trade the Narwhale for the ownership of the delta and shift the balance of power in the city. And that's why his messenger would reveal such a proud smile.

“Right, here's your next delivery.”

A piece of paper was discreetly slipped into Lawrence's free hand, as if he had it from the beginning. Even Lawrence was fooled by this; no one around them would have noticed the exchange if they weren't paying close attention.

“..right.”

Lawrence barely replied, to which the man simply nodded and proceeded to vanish. It wasn't even in an envelope.. were they tempting Lawrence to read it? Or did it no longer matter if he read it or not? But he knew better than to read it, lest Eve find a way to trap him. No matter how sharp her fangs were, she couldn't chew into a stone. If he knew nothing, he knew nothing that could trap him.

There was a huge gulf between having access to information about and actually knowing it, so being conservative was his best option. Before he understood the situation, he should stay quiet and obscure his thoughts. He just had to act natural, despite how difficult that might be. It was only those people who could keep their emotions under control like this who could be merchants.

Having remembered this, he also remembered having to tell himself that evil spirits didn't exist when he was young and had to go outside to relieve himself at night. He followed his instructions and delivered the letter to Eve, waiting for her reply. This time she remained silent, but gave him a look of pity.

If he could act naturally in this situation, so could she. So it was impossible for him to know how genuine her expression was. But the messiness of her hair, and the tired wrinkles on her face were certainly honest. There were even more letters on her desk this time around.

As he left, he forced himself to clear his mind of the image of her sitting in front of the desk,

reading all of those letters on her own. He had Holo's support, that was true. And Holo's support was vital for when the situation turned sour, because she could reset the situation to a blank slate.

But Eve was alone. She faced this battle without friends, just doubts. She was in a dangerous situation, and if anyone knew she was in league with Keeman, the landowners of the north would surely exact a terrible revenge. Every time he thought about that, he felt his sense of worry for Eve grow. He felt his firm resolve melting away.

“What’s wrong?”

As he received Keeman's next reply from the messenger, he was asked this question.

“Nothing.”

Lawrence acted naturally. The messenger didn't press the issue. But as Lawrence tried to work his way through the crowds to rush to Eve's hideout, he noticed how close he was to breaking out into a run. He was getting anxious.

All he carried were pieces of paper. And all he had to do was carry those papers. He kept repeating this to himself, but it wasn't helping him settle down. He knew it was no excuse; the messages he was delivering could so easily decide the lives and destinies of many people.

“Please wait a moment.”

On his fourth delivery, when Lawrence handed over his letter the door guard - who previously only asked for the password - didn't let him enter the room. Any kind of torture, if repeated over and over, would become less effective. But with this sudden change, Lawrence became more nervous. As expected, the door guard offered no explanation and just stood still after handing the letter to Eve in the room.

The two guards made no conversation, and didn't even gesture to one another. Time flew by, the noise of the street seeping into the dead silence in the inn. Eve's replies were taking longer to pass on to Lawrence, so the contents of the letters were likely starting to get to the real meat of the subject. Eve needed to seriously consider the details before she replied.

There was no correct solution, and in this kind of situation nobody knew, solving a problem related to one's own destiny - without any external help - was no small task. Lawrence had once been pursued by thieves in a dark forest. Of the two paths he could take, one would lead him to a dead end deep in the forest, and the only way to find out if he had taken that path was to press on. The quill in Eve's hand now was probably heavier than a chunk of lead.

When the door finally opened, the old deaf-seeming man came out with a letter. He looked Lawrence over and handed the letter to him slowly. The letter was slightly wrinkled and it was

soaked in sweat - Eve's pains and hard work were clear. When Lawrence handed that letter to Keeman's messenger, he finally received a clue.

"The boss is really anxious. 'The current is getting stronger.. we'll have to prepare some boats and paddles.' That's what he says."

Keeman wasn't just dealing with Eve. The current was probably driven by countless merchants, so he had to hold the rudder firmly. He needed his messengers to be as efficient as possible. Perhaps the reason why, even at this point, the letters weren't being sealed was because time was too precious and they couldn't even wait for the wax to set. Lawrence nodded and ran back to Eve.

Again the door guard only passed the letter through the door; Lawrence wasn't able to see Eve, so there was no way he could put pressure on her to hurry. But he knew that even if he tried to do so, he wouldn't get her responses any faster. She wasn't stupid. Regardless of what the strategy was, she must have detected the change in mood and realized the consequences.. as well as the consequences of failing to go along with it.

If the current was so fast that even Keeman was getting anxious, then the letters arriving to Eve must have changed accordingly. No matter how his strategy had the potential to overturn the situation, Eve wasn't in a position to just take this lightly. In fact, secret deals always had to be hidden carefully between everyday dealings. She had to be desperate.

And so Lawrence did his best to act calmly as he waited in the hallway. He kept reminding himself that a good merchant would wait two or three days for the scales to balance for their own profits. However, it was also true that waiting too long meant missing opportunities.

When he finally received her reply from the old man, he instantly bid farewell and sped off. He didn't even know who's side he was on. Was he rushing to help Keeman's plan run smoothly, or buy more time for Eve, or just because he was caught up in the atmosphere? He had no idea.

Keeman's messenger was beginning to look frazzled, with beads of sweat dotting his forehead. As he waited for him to relay Eve's reply, Lawrence overheard the latest news about the meeting from some passing merchants speaking with their colleagues at the inn.

It appeared that they would come to a conclusion earlier than expected. The moment they came to a consensus, all of Keeman's hard work would turn to sand. And an opportunity like this wouldn't knock on his door again.

Keeman's messenger began to press him on the importance of speed, and so Lawrence had to excitingly press Eve's door guard for her to hurry. But Eve was taking even longer to reply, and her writing was getting harder to decipher. Lawrence lost track of how many times he had relayed letters by running between the inns in this increasing tension.

As he was handing another letter to her door guard, he froze. Something felt off this time; he got the distinct impression that something had gone wrong. The door guard blinked at him in surprise, so he smiled.. but his heart was beating furiously. The guard took the letter and went into the room to hand it to Eve.

“...surely not..”

He whispered to himself.. why did she take so long to reply? Keeman had to be at the meeting, so he was surely busier than her. Yet he could decide and reply almost immediately. It wasn't as simple as a difference in their personalities.. there had to be a real reason. Eve could unhesitatingly draw a knife on someone to achieve her desires. She wasn't the kind of person who'd tear her hair out hesitatingly and indecisively.

Each time he managed to get a peek into her room, the piles of letters seemed to be growing. There were so many that just reading them all could take a normal person their entire life. But he was overlooking something serious - something fundamental. He was being forced to wait for a long time in that hallway on every visit. Had he seen anyone else? Had anyone else actually brought a letter to the room?

By the time he finally received her reply, after what seemed like an eternity, it felt like the storm that had raged in his head had finally calmed. He was finally able to calmly analyze the situation. As the old man emerged from the room, he once again spotted all the letters on the floor. But, he only had to think in simple terms: why was she casting them onto the floor after reading them? What was her aim?

Lawrence put the letter in his pocket and left the inn in a hurry. Right from the start, there was something incomprehensible about the premise for the current dealings. The oddest thing was the fact that Eve was being childish and saying had she had to win all of the profit. Despite that, the discussions he had with her and the atmosphere in her room made him accept her childish remarks.

She wasn't the type who became a merchant thinking that betrayal came naturally, but rather the type who got where she was through many hardships. It wouldn't be strange for her to willingly walk an evil path in the hopes of finding a world without pain.

It wouldn't be strange, but it *was* unnecessary. It was just an excuse to choose a path to harm others because *she* was in pain. But what if it was all just an act? Lawrence's face became pale. Sometimes one would earn more through patience, and other times they had to be quick to earn at all. This time it was the latter.. once an agreement was reached, Keeman's plan would be fruitless.

If she wasn't working in her own interest, but rather for someone else's sake, then it made sense for her to take so long between replies - she was stalling for time. There were opportunists like Keeman in every city, patiently waiting to outwit their opponents at every

chance. How would the veterans, who rose to the top on that same painful road, handle a young upstart like him? Wouldn't they use someone like Eve to stop his reckless charge?

If they were skillfully presenting him with a false opportunity to waste his time, then letting that opportunity go was the only way to find a way to beat them. Everything was falling into place for Lawrence. All those letters on the floor, but no one to deliver them.. no fear of reprisal written on Eve's face..

Lawrence handed her letter to Keeman's messenger, but grabbed the man's shoulder to keep him from darting off immediately to his master.

“Please pass Mr. Keeman a message from me.”

The man frowned, but Lawrence couldn't bring himself to care.

“I believe the wolf is a trap.”

If someone like Keeman heard those words, he would be able to figure it all out. It was even possible that Jeeda, the current master of the guild, was using Eve to bait Keeman. If Keeman was using Lawrence as a disposable pawn, then it was no surprise if there were people above him doing the same thing to get rid of a threat through legal means. But Lawrence was the one who would end up suffering if that were true – even if he begged for Holo's help, she couldn't restore his status in the business world after something like that.

The messenger looked pained at Lawrence's desperate plea and left without any parting words. He must have the same orders as Lawrence, to not listen to anyone and to simply deliver messages. It was too dangerous for them to think on their own, but this wasn't a situation where they could afford to do that. If Eve was a trap set for Keeman, he needed to avoid it now. They could still turn away before the trap was sprung, but once they fell in it was all over.

Lawrence anxiously waited in the inn. Because of how long it was taking compared to Eve, this was the first time he was impatiently waiting on Keeman. He didn't feel it had taken *that* long, but he was glad to finally see Keeman's messenger return. He waited on pins and needles for the messenger to say something.. but he only gave Lawrence a letter in silence.

“The boss didn't say anything?”

The messenger shook his head as if surprised Lawrence would even ask.

“Please deliver this to her.”

“Uh..”

Lawrence was rendered speechless, unable to find anything but the most basic response.

“He said *nothing*?”

He grabbed the messenger's shoulders as he asked, but the man just turned away and kept his mouth shut - he hadn't told Keeman. But Lawrence wasn't capable of anger right now, just nervousness and anxiety.

“I'm not just speaking without evidence, and I know why they'd order you to stay silent, but there is no one who understands everything except the Almighty.. listening to everything is worthless if you miss the most important thing. We still have time to make a move, so please tell him-”

“Enough!”

That short little man, perfectly suited to be a messenger, responded with a surprisingly deep voice. Without realizing it, Lawrence released the man's shoulders: he didn't sound like a person who walked along the right path.

“You are just a merchant, don't think so highly of yourself. The boss knows everything.”

Every syllable was filled with the taste of bloody mud. It wasn't surprising for Keeman to use someone so obviously from a street gang on his team.

“You and I.. we just have to do our jobs.”

Lawrence finally learned what it meant to “be loyal.” It was a stupid word that caused the unnecessary deaths of many knights and mercenaries. But merchants were supposed to be able to avoid that by using logic. Lawrence wasn't afraid. He pressed on.

“Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes the only person who sees what's going on is the one who is actually there. It's also our job to keep our boss from making an obvious mistake, isn't it?”

The messenger finally averted his gaze and stared at the floor. Of course he would regret his loyalty if it ended up killing Keeman. He *had* to convince the man. He *must*. As he worked up the courage to continue, the man raised his face and spat.

“Remember this, merchant. We are only dogs. We don't think. Hands and legs don't need a mind of their own. Do you understand?”

There was no anger in the man's voice. It was simply the voice of someone living deep in the world of crime, threatening and insidious. It took Lawrence's breath away, even if he wasn't scared. That tone of voice was gone when the man continued.

“Since you understand, deliver this letter. That's the bosses' only order.. for both of us.”

After speaking he gently hit Lawrence on the shoulder as he stood frozen to the spot. He then took off like a man trying to regain the time he had just wasted. No one around them was paying attention, it was a brief conversation and obviously trivial.

Lawrence was working for Keeman. There could be no doubt. Thinking wasn't a pawn's job. Lawrence did understand. He knew he had to tolerate all of this to find the right chance. But as a lonely traveling merchant, he had his pride. And that's why this felt so awful.

He might be a small fry, but he never thought of himself as a faceless cog. He had a name. He was an independent, thinking merchant. Being denied his basic nature felt even worse than he'd expected. Being told he was just an unthinking part of some machine was like having his heart shot by an arrow.

However, it was just as the anger was swelling through him and making him want to shout that it suddenly made sense.. why Eve was acting like a child and doing what she wanted.. why she was driving so hard to get all the profit.. it wasn't because she was buying time, or because she had a plan. From the bottom of his heart he felt that if he was going to be caught in a trap, he might as well close his eyes and jump right in. There wasn't any time for logic now, just emotion.

This time when he arrived at Eve's inn, he was actually permitted to see her. There was no way to see a person's true mind behind their eyes, but it was possible to understand it to some degree through their behavior and expressions. She kept her head above the table with her hands, smiling so innocently that it could fool anyone.

“You seem to be doing well today.”

But the wolves of the Roam river didn't wear their true smiles on their faces. Lawrence held out the letter he was ordered to deliver.

“You really *are* planning on taking all the profit from the Narwhale, aren't you?”

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Her smile vanished, and after a moment her eyebrow raised as she frowned. Now *that* was the kind of smile suited for a wolf who secretly laughed at everything. Her family was sold for money, her destiny thrown about. In order to swim in this sea of sulphuric acid, she used various powers and people. And as she did so, she must have been used even more by others.

Had she first gained fame as the leader of her family, or as a beautiful woman? Certainly, there was nobody who would call her name with affection. Perhaps that was why she was no longer going by “Fleur Boland.” When others used her as a tool, she hid behind a mask. Perhaps that was being too simple and emotional, but it couldn't be that far from the truth.

She finally took the letter, slowly closing her eyes, before gently smiling again.

“You're not cut out to be a merchant.”

“And you're not cut out to be a wolf.”

But such a short and sharp conversation was better-suited to be held between priests and their gods. Eve squinted at the fire before speaking.

“I plan to survive no matter who I have to use. But it seems I can't keep running from reality forever.”

She held her finger to the left corner of her mouth while speaking, as if joking. It seemed she couldn't say anything serious without trying to cover it up as a joke.

“When the mess in this city came up, all the furs - my entire net worth – were confiscated. Arold, the one who took this dangerous trip with me from Lenos, was arrested. Under such circumstances there's no way I can find the courage to be a wolf anymore.”

It was clear that the northerners were finding the negotiations difficult. People caught at an impasse would fling those who were weaker into oncoming danger to save themselves. Just as Lawrence expected. Eve had probably been used like this countless times, but this time they were making a mistake.. this time her patience was at an end.

“My name has always been a convenient tool. Only my grandpa and a few others have ever called me by name. And Arold is the only one of them who's still alive.”

Living one's entire life as a pawn or a tool was something beyond Lawrence's comprehension. It seemed somehow both complicated and trivial. He could only truly understand what it was like to go on an unexpected journey after having a chance encounter. He slowly spoke.

“So all you want is to hear someone call your name.”

She lived at the summit of a hill that was surrounded only by enemies, not friends.

“It's too embarrassing to hear you blurt it out so casually.. ah.. don't get angry.. I'm glad that we don't have to fight each other with knives and swords. It's nice to understand and be understood. But it's also surprising.. you're such a nice guy that I thought it would be easy to manipulate you.. but..”

In Eve's talkative speech there were many unforgivable words, but a merchant's tongue was able to bring money as well as trouble. The fact that she was throwing these insults so freely meant that she wasn't speaking as a merchant.

“But I couldn't stand not letting you know. Of course you're free to believe what you will..”

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## Chapter 9

After passing Eve's letter to Keeman's messenger, Lawrence waited at the inn for his reply. It was taking a lot longer than usual. The number of merchants by the bar was dwindling. Things were quieting down. Several merchants remained, exactly where he saw them each time he came by. They too were probably messengers, given how quickly they averted their eyes when he looked at them.

It was still a while before sunset, but according to the already-drunk merchants the meeting was reaching a conclusion. Their task for the day was drawing to a close. It seemed the meeting was finally coming to a simple, boring, consensus: the northern landowners would give up on the Narwhale, and the southerners would compensate them appropriately.

It made sense, since the southerners could still leverage their enormous capital to sway the northern farmers, thus winning the Narwhale. As such, the northern landowners had little choice but to give up on it. In fact, they probably had *no* choice but to do so.

The southerners could only buy the Narwhale back or win it by force of arms. Both options were costly, but if war broke out then all business activity in town would cease, and other cities could take advantage of the situation. Everyone in Gerube would lose. Unfortunately, it was quite unlikely that the southerners could raise the funds to buy back the Narwhale.

With the looming threat of such an unreasonable war, the plight of the northerners - who only had their fists to fight with - invoked sympathy. But unreasonable situations were as common as the pebbles on a road. If you stumbled and fell, few who would offer their hand to help you back up.

“Sorry to keep you waiting so long.”

By the time Keeman's messenger returned with his reply, the smell of wine and roast meat had seeped into Lawrence. Lawrence hadn't read Eve's last letter to Keeman, but given that Keeman's reply was sealed with red wax its contents must have been of some importance.

“This'll be the last letter for today.. but you must bring me her reply.”

That small-bodied messenger was the type one might mistake for a coward, only to find a poisoned dagger in their side later. Lawrence knew that “must” the man forced into his sentence wasn't just for emphasis. Keeman's seal was on the letter so Eve would know it was for her eyes only. In other words, it contained Keeman's final offer.

“Very well, I'll make it so.”

A pawn was just a pawn. It wasn't there to think. Hearing Lawrence's response, the messenger

nodded in satisfaction. But his eyes still followed Lawrence until he left. The meeting was over; the man's job must have ended.

As Lawrence walked through those crowded streets he raised his head, gazed up at the clear sky above him, and grumbled under his breath. So now they were suspicious of him? It made him laugh, though he wasn't sure why.

“Tomorrow morning we'll move the Narwhale out, as though we're conducting normal operations. We'll exchange the boat with the Narwhale for the deed of land ownership, on the river. After that, get lost! Signed Keeman.”

That last sentence sure was amusing. Eve handed the letter to Lawrence after she finished reading it out loud. She had read exactly what was written, including Keeman's bold signature at the bottom. If she were to expose Keeman now, it would be impossible for him to retain his status.

The fact that Keeman handed the letter to Lawrence meant that he believed it was safe to give it to Eve. Lawrence found it difficult to believe that Keeman really considered “safe”, but he wouldn't simply have done so without justification. He must have a contingency prepared in advance, just in case she tried to expose him.

“It's a trivial exchange of products. What say you?”

“If things go badly, we could always capsize the boat to hide the truth, so it's not a bad plan.”

Eve raised her eyebrows at his suggestion, which was the one Holo had suggested to him earlier, before whispering bemusedly.

“Indeed.”

“Then perhaps I ought to reply like this.. How does this sound to you?”

She playfully voiced out a letter as she wrote it onto a very smooth piece of parchment. It was *not* the sort of parchment a merchant would play around with; it was the type that would be used by a proper monk in a grand stone monastery to record the wisdom of God. Indeed, the words she wrote - written as beautifully as any monk's - were formidable.

“Understood. I, Eve Boland, shall be aboard a boat with the deed as our representative for the exchange, and aboard your boat shall be the creature of legend, and your representative..”

She looked straight at Lawrence.

“Kraft Lawrence.”

Lawrence moved to respond, but Eve didn't care. She simply signed the parchment in a very

natural motion, and casually threw it over to the old man who was stirring the wax. After it had been sealed and tied with a strand of horse hair, it would be ready for delivery. Now Lawrence would have to also be on the boat for the exchange.

“I haven’t responded yet.”

He heard chuckling behind him. The guards at the door had been listening. He'd heard that Eve had them spared from death sentences. Her scheming was so masterful that she even told them her plans to earn their trust and their complete support. Now those same men were laughing at his expense. They were rude, but cleverer than they looked.

“Responded? You say such silly things sometimes. What solid meaning could words have to merchants, who lie every day?”

Lawrence smiled bitterly.. What a relaxed way for her to say something like that. Of course, any facial expression was meaningless to a merchant, so aside from smiling he kept his expression the same.

“Trading is dangerous. Only the Almighty can see people's thoughts, but He has no desires. Only a person consumed by greed or desire will trade. And in this world, there’s nothing more dangerous than trusting such a person. I wrote my reply to Keeman, and now you’ll deliver it. As for the results, all we can do is pray or threaten while we wait. I’ve done all I can do in giving you this letter.”

She handed the letter to Lawrence as soon as she received it back from the old man. It could decide her destiny, yet she handed it away with such ease. She wasn't being brave, she just didn't care about her own life. Should things go badly her worth would plummet, and worthless things were abandoned. As Lawrence took the letter, her words reminded him of the words of a famous reckless hero.

“Keeman will definitely do as the letter says. If he tries putting someone other than you on his boat, then to be safe we'll have to add someone on our own boat. Because of suspicion, we'd both end up with an army on our boats. So-”

She paused, placed the hand that had given Lawrence the letter on her desk, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, clearly nervous.. all apparently for dramatic effect.

“So, when we meet again it will be on that lonely river veiled by the morning haze.”

Being the wolf of the Roam river, Eve shared some definite similarities with Holo. Lawrence’s eyes saw her hands on the desk. They seemed to want to be held, despite carefully hiding the fact. It was as though they wanted to trust someone, but couldn’t.

“May I ask one more thing?”

Her hand flinched slightly as he asked.

“What is it?”

“I still have my companions..”

If they were trading by river and Lawrence chose betrayal, he and Eve would have to transfer with the Narwhale to a boat waiting for them somewhere. But that would leave Holo and Cole on the land, complicating matters. After all, Keeman had planned things around Holo and Cole being potential hostages. Eve quietly pulled her hand back off the desk.

“And I have Arold.”

Those words pierced Lawrence’s heart.

“Alright, go. I’ve given you my reply.”

She looked bothered as she spoke. She waved her hand dismissively, as if to shoo Lawrence away. If he resisted she might start yelling.

*And I have Arold.* Those words were a crucial hint, if he could trust them. They meant that Arold was one of the few things that she felt couldn’t be bought by money. Of course, Lawrence knew Holo’s true power. She could keep them safe, and even save Arold. But Eve had proven herself to be too willing to tempt fate, and she had no idea about Holo.

She had come to Gerube with Arold and the fur from Lenos, and she trusted him so much that she paid his fees. But now she was even prepared to give him up. Lawrence wanted to think it was because she trusted him even more than she trusted Arold, but knew how stupid that thought was.

Lawrence found it easier to believe that Eve was so determined she would give up everything for profit, as though she had sworn to turn everything she touched into gold. Of course in that ancient legend the foolish being who wished to turn everything into gold ended up starving.

Needless to say, her words shocked him. He found himself wondering whether he could just cast her aside like that - she, who was so dangerously close to walking a path to her own destruction. If she could cast Arold aside, she could just as easily kill Lawrence on the boat or betray him afterward.

It would be worth the risk if he could imagine her laughing at the end; but he couldn’t. Was he pitying her? He couldn’t tell. Was he just grasping at straws? Probably. But in this world, there were few things that weren’t just assumptions. There were many who even doubted the existence of God.

So what should he do? How could he maintain his interests in one hand, and hold her hand in the other? He was still asking himself such questions as he passed her letter on to Keeman's messenger.

“Thanks for your hard work. The boss said he'd fill you in on the rest when you get back to the inn.”

He patted on Lawrence's shoulder and left so quickly that Lawrence didn't even have the time to wonder if he'd understood him correctly.

Apparently the meeting had already ended. As Lawrence wandered through the Stream of Gold, he saw people discussing things excitedly. A fire had been lit for the night. Soldiers stood tall, trying to appear dignified beside the tables for the meeting, as if they were guarding some holy seat.

It could aptly be described as a feast of money, power and fame; the kind that made for a great story. In reality the participants were wretched and small-minded people; the kind that validated God's attitude toward merchants.

The sky was dyed red. Crows, or perhaps gulls, could be seen flying high overhead. Lawrence had always believed that trading was something more elegant and noble than this. As he sat on the ferry heading south from the delta, he let himself sway with the boat as he watched lanterns on shore light up one by one.

Eve wouldn't back down now. Nor did Lawrence believe that Keeman's plan would be foolhardy. What his faction feared the most was losing the Narwhale and ending up with a false deed of land ownership. That outcome would be more tragic than his plan being exposed.

The situation wouldn't get any better now if Lawrence quit. The plan was like thoroughly-kneaded dough that was ready for the oven.. all he could do now was pray or flee. Persuading Keeman or Eve was impossible now, so he had to tread carefully to make sure things came to a good end.

When the ferry docked, Lawrence melted into the crowd walking ashore. Most of them had been on the delta watching the meeting, and were now smiling as they selfishly chatted. He knew he was only taking offense because he needed to vent his frustrations; he felt like shouting out and vomiting, like he'd been chasing after a cloud he couldn't catch.

He felt his fist ball up instinctively when a drunk merchant who could barely stand bumped into him. Luckily, something else caught his attention just before he punched the man.

"Heyy.. don' bump inta me.."

Lawrence didn't care about some shady-eyed drunk selfishly blubbering away, but another ferry

had landed behind the man. Among its slowly-disembarking passengers, Lawrence spied a familiar face wrapped in a scarf peering at him; he'd never seen those eyes making that expression.

“Heyy, you lissenin’?”

“Sorry.”

Lawrence handed the man a ratty silver coin, though his eyes were still glued on his new target. He had no idea why that person would come here to the south, now that the meeting was over. But judging from the figure's stance, the situation was desperate. What happened? Just as he was opening his mouth to speak..

“Things just took a turn for the worst.”

The voice coming from under that scarf wasn't just husky, it was bone dry.

“I've been.. but maybe.. you can still..”

“Ah!”

Eve's legs wobbled, and she nearly fell to her knees. Not doing so seemed to require her last burst of energy. Lawrence instinctively steadied her, but withdrew his hand immediately afterward. It was no act, Eve was light as a feather and feverish. She was breathing sharply under her scarf and a layer of greasy sweat was on her brow. However, her right hand was tightly grasping a piece of parchment.

“What happened?”

She was practically leaning against him. She bit her lips and desperately tried to communicate something with her eyes. Something drastic must have happened. He turned his attention to her right hand, to the parchment it was grasping. It had to be about something very important.

“We stand out too much here.. let's find an alley..”

Just as he finished speaking and starting dragging her away, the church bell began to toll. The groups walking through the port stopped and stared in its direction before joining their hands in prayer. As it tolled, Lawrence continued supporting Eve as they wove through the crowd. Its distraction must have been God's mercy.

Once they left the crowd they would soon be at an alley. But the bell stopped as suddenly as it began, leaving behind only its echoes. Lawrence also stopped. It seemed that God had realized that Lawrence was a merchant..

“Where are you going?”

This was indeed a possible outcome, even at such a heavily-trafficked port, and even when the meeting had just ended and many people were leaving the delta. No, Lawrence didn't consider it a fluke that they'd been spotted by Keeman's messenger. If the man could deliver any letter through any crowd then his eyes were certainly sharp enough to spot Eve.

“Since my friend’s in this state, I was taking her to an inn.”

“Is that so?”

Keeman smiled, as though they were just engaging in idle banter. But his messenger, and another man who seemed to be his thug, quietly moved toward them.

“How lucky for us to chance upon you here.”

As Lawrence moved to protect Eve, the approaching men changed their stance. Being attacked by thieves was common. Be they human or beast, all would assume a particular posture before attacking.

What should he do? It wouldn't be wise to let Keeman think he'd allied with Eve, and Keeman might still might not think he had. His only choice was to bet that Keeman hadn't.. but could he really go through with it?

Could he really give up the sweating and exhausted Eve, after she came all this way to tell him something? Could he forsake her, as he watched her flinch at Keeman's words?

“No.. I..”

“I see.. you’re carrying a letter. Am I correct in saying that it’s from Ted Reynolds?”

Eve shook her head weakly. Keeman's tone had switched from a merchant's tone to an intentionally melodic jocular one; it was quite fitting of a noble. But Lawrence didn't have time to focus on such things. His mind was racing.. a letter from Reynolds?

“We’ll patiently grant you an audience.. although we won’t have much time to listen.”

Keeman waved his right hand, and his two henchmen drew in to pull Eve away from him. Lawrence instinctively reached out his hand to shield her, without thinking. That hand only stopped because the small man beside him pointed a dagger at his belly.

“This wolf tried to frame us, and get us stuck so we couldn't do anything at all.”

Sometimes a smile represented anger. When Keeman, a merchant engaging in large-scale trading, smiled like this, what was the fate of those taken away by his minions? As he had Eve sent away, he spoke as if praising a worthy rival.

“I’d anticipated this sort of thing, but I didn’t expect it to go quite like this.”

“You’re wrong, I wasn’t planning to sell Reynolds the Narwhale..”

Kidnappers were said to have strong arms. Eve was vainly trying to struggle free, but observers would only see someone taking care of a drunk. Her mouth was covered, but the eyes visible above her scarf were furiously darting around.



“Mr. Lawrence.”

The two men dragged Eve away. Before they vanished into the crowd, Keeman turned his attention to Lawrence.

“If you dare mention this to anyone, you'll regret it.”

Keeman must have been joking, but his next words struck fear deep into Lawrence's heart.

“I'm desperate too.”

Keeman then vanished as though he was chasing after Eve, who was being slowly swallowed by the crowd. By the time Lawrence finally came to, the knife against his belly was long gone. All that remained was his own stiff body, and a mind still obsessing over Keeman's parting words.

A hand had been desperately reaching out in hope from that squirming and disgusting creature-like crowd - and Lawrence had failed to grab it.

Even a hundred coins would sink into the sea in an instant. So if Keeman and Eve slipped into that whirlpool of unimaginably high stakes for the Narwhale, would they sink as well? A priest's face would pale at such thoughts. Eve had sunk. She had always crossed dangerous bridges, until her foot finally slipped. Keeman's words lingered in Lawrence's mind: “if you dare mention this to anyone, you'll regret it. I'm desperate too.”

Somewhere along the way, their plans had collapsed entirely. Ted Reynolds was now involved, and despite Eve's claim that she wasn't selling him the Narwhale, only Lawrence was left behind unscathed. Was it because Keeman felt he had nothing to contribute? Or that he believed he was under Eve's influence? It felt like he thought of Lawrence as nothing but a messenger.

Lawrence sighed, trying to suppress his sudden urge to vomit. He nervously ran into the alley that he failed to take Eve to before finally letting it all out. It wasn't that he felt utterly useless, he just couldn't stand feeling such unimaginable self-loathing. He had been relieved.. so relieved.. that Keeman hadn't taken him away as well.

He believed he could still show Holo his strong side by winning Keeman over. He was sure it was still possible for him to salvage the situation even after this incident and his discussion with Eve. And yet here he was, in this miserable state. If he'd only been overwhelmed by a sense of uselessness then he would have been able to recover without it coming to this.

A merchant should always move forward, chasing after things they didn't have. Lawrence continued retching long after he had nothing left to vomit, then spat. He'd been able to save Holo, and had escaped many dangers. It was better for him if he was just being unreasonably confident.. right now, if his thin skin was torn, his even-more-rotten innards would be exposed.

His vision was clouded, and not only because he had vomited. Eve's actions seemed confused. The plan had collapsed due to Reynold's letter. And yet disregarding the danger that put her in, she had rushed to the south to tell Lawrence, thinking to at least keep him safe.

She wasn't just thinking of him as a pawn after all. When she asked him to join her in betrayal, she might have been aiming at another objective besides the Narwhale. There was something else. And here stood Lawrence, feeling such relief that only she had been dragged away.. he wasn't a courageous main character.

“SHIT!”

He punched the building he was leaning against. If it was money he lost, he could accept it and give up.. but not when it was a person. Traveling on his own in a wagon had been terribly lonely, but in a way it had also been liberating: he only had himself to worry about.

Traveling merchants could easily settle in a town if they wished. But not him. He couldn't bring himself to do it. He knew he was a coward and was too kind for his own good. The life of a traveling merchant was a non-stop journey of hellos and goodbyes, because how could they be satisfied with the products in one place when there might be better ones over the next hill?

It was true he thought such outrageous things. But it was also true that he invested his capital in that expensive creature named Holo. He couldn't deny that. But it didn't mean that everything was fine as long as Holo was safe. The “traveling merchant's curse” was just an excuse. Relationships didn't have a suggested retail value.

If money could decide everything, he wouldn't be wavering between Eve and Keeman, since compared to the struggle over the Narwhale, his total earnings were basically worthless. Therefore, by thinking that relationships were more important than money, and flowers just outside his reach were more difficult to obtain than money, he tried to keep making the decision at arm's length.

But a wagon could only hold so much, and the same was true of Lawrence's heart. He knew how big his wagon was. He pushed his fist against the wall to stand upright, and dried his eyes while staring up at the purple sky. Problems were all so much simpler when Holo was with him, no matter how much she'd laugh at him for thinking that.

But new things were always trying to get onto wagons, by forcing other important goods out. It was a routine exercise for those curious beings called merchants, but normal people without the determination of a monk had no way of dealing with it.

And yet, his journeys were more enjoyable when he had to worry about not leaving anything important on his wagon behind.. at least then he wasn't bored on his own. Yes.. those journeys were more enjoyable. Much more enjoyable. His life was no longer a set of repetitive trips staring at the rear of a horse.

He vomited one last volley of bitterness, then crudely wiped his mouth. Traveling merchants hauled their cargo from city to city even if they had to crawl through mud to do so. They never wanted to abandon their goods, no matter what difficulties they might face.

“So..”

He muttered to himself to reactivate his reluctant brain. He really was lucky that Eve was caught right in front of him. They were being so forceful that the problems they faced had to be tremendous. They had no time to plan anything complicated.

Few people were used to making long-term plans; preparing for contingencies, and avoiding potential future dangers. They could only buy or sell what was in front of their eyes. He had a chance. He really did. He focused his mind on that thought.

He wasn't used to planning for the long-term, or tactically avoiding contingencies, but buying and selling the goods in front of his eyes was his forte. He had a chance. He ought to. He focused his mind on that single thought. He was just an observer now, an unrelated outsider watching the trades taking place in a market.

He also wasn't alone. He didn't wonder when or why that person arrived, but he knew they wouldn't be able to stay put in an inn without knowing what was happening. If so, the natural thing to do would be to blend into a crowd and listen closely, and this port was the place to do so. After all, his companion had two eyes of unmatched sharpness.

Having wolf's ears capable of hearing a pin drop, she was now unhappily standing nearby. She stood up against a wall, her arms folded across her chest. She must have seen everything, and even if she hadn't she would have been able to guess. He smiled and shrugged, as if casting a spell to return himself to normalcy.

“If you require wisdom, I shall lend it to you.”

Only her mouth was visible from under her hood.

“That'll do.”

“Just how many times will you ask me to save another female?”

She must be being so straightforward because the situation was dire. Either that, or she just couldn't stand it anymore. Naturally, Lawrence smiled.

“And yet, you are the only one I travel with.”

She didn't answer, and instead turned her head away to face the wall. She was probably sick of embarrassing conversations as well, but if he said that out loud his head would be gnawed off.

“I had Cole follow those people.”

“What did you learn at the port?”

“I am uncertain. But I saw a group of people growing agitated before you came ashore. I was standing on the third floor of the bread shop over there. It was amusingly easy to see everything.”

Then, it wasn't just a small handful of people with Keeman and Eve who were acting openly. In the commotion their smuggling ships would be at risk as well.

Eve had said, before being carried away, that she had no intention of selling the Narwhale to Reynolds. This suggested that the letter in Eve's hands was a ploy from Reynolds.

If it was a problem deeper than the contract between Keeman and Eve, then why not broaden his viewpoint? He was on the side of the northern landowners, so it couldn't be too many things. Was he trying to purchase the Narwhale?

“The northerners may be trying to buy the Narwhale..”

“Hmm..”

“But if it were that simple, Keeman wouldn't be panicking and Eve wouldn't risk coming here. Something beyond their expectations has to have happened for them to do so.”

Hearing that, Holo took Lawrence's hand and began pulling him forward before replying.

“This town seems quite poor. It cannot have much wealth.”

“Right, and I've also heard that Reynolds is the central figure behind this.”

Reynolds could use trickery with crates to earn a little coin, but it wouldn't be enough for him to purchase the Narwhale.

“He would have to loan the money.”

“Indeed, if he really means to buy the Narwhale, he would have to collect capital from somewhere. Aha! So that's why Keeman and Eve would react that way..”

Lawrence finally caught a glimpse of Holo's eyes. She was squinting with displeasure. If she had seen everything that happened after Lawrence landed in the south end of town, including his run-in with Eve and Keeman, her eyes had probably been squinting this entire time. He told himself that after this was over he would have to do something to make her smile, like she did for Cole.

“Money and power are interlinked. If this trade is related to someone wealthy and powerful, then it is surely a complicated matter. Understood?”

That is how things were since time immemorial. Holo pouted, as if warning him not to test her.

“..one requests a refund if their meal never arrives.”

Her mind was quick indeed. He recalled the manner in which Eve was dragged away, all because things could no longer be settled by numbers in a ledger.

“It's their style to demand a refund with money.. or blood. If you're correct then there's only one place Keeman would take Eve.”

Fight power with power. Reynolds suggested buying the Narwhale to Eve because he guessed the secret contract Keeman had formed with her. That made it tough to gauge just how much power was ready to crush Keeman; keeping a couple of gangs in the area would backfire and worsen the situation.

Lawrence put more power into his grip on Holo's hand and steered them in the opposite direction. Holo had to have set a place to reunite with Cole, and if Lawrence was correct then it was the place they should be going now. They pushed their way through the crowd and arrived quickly, only to see an increased number of guards there. It was like they were preparing for the worst.

“The Church?”

Holo murmured, but then her eyes were drawn to something: the surprised face of Cole.

“What? Why are you here?”

Cole had covered himself with a ratty coat to play a beggar. Lawrence was now confident that his guesses were correct.

“Keeman's in there, isn't he? In any case, to save Eve I'll have to see him face to face. How should I attack?”

Holo smiled, revealing her fangs.

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“Who goes there?”

As they walked up to the entrance of the Church, two spears criss-crossed to block them. Lawrence had brought Holo and Cole, who had changed clothes beforehand. He spoke to the

guards with a smile.

“We are looking for Mr. Lud Keeman from the Rowen Guild.”

Those magic words were a god-given gift, but it wasn't always the same god that sat upon the throne. Unlike the day before, one of the stone-faced soldiers walked in to check while the other kept his spear pointed at Lawrence. Holo's strategy was straightforward, and the only detail that surprised Lawrence was that Cole, and not her, would follow him into the Church.

“..Go on in.”

The returning soldier's reply was abrupt. Lawrence first smiled at the soldiers in thanks for withdrawing their spears, then walked between them through the narrowly-opened door. Once Cole had passed in after him, it was immediately shut and they were silently greeted by more spears.

“..”

It was a signal for them to move forward. Lawrence took big steps down the corridor with the spears pointed at his back. It was quiet inside; he could swear he could even hear the torches' flames. The ceiling was high and the sculptures ornate, but they looked like other-worldly demons. It was a bad omen.

When they arrived at a door in the middle of the corridor, the soldiers halted them. The room seemed to sometimes be used as a depot. A soldier knocked on the normal-looking door and it opened. It was Keeman's messenger who greeted them. His displeased look made it clear that Lawrence was *not* welcome.

“I wish to speak with Mr. Keeman.”

Lawrence flashed him his best smile. He knew the man looked down on him as just a merchant, so it should be easy to offend him. This way, Holo's simple tactic would be most effective.

“Didn't you understand that you were deliberately left alone for your own sake?”

Threats were only effective if the victim wasn't prepared for them, like being surprised by a snake in a meadow.. Lawrence, however, was prepared and already had a counter-attack.

“Merchants are all about taking chestnuts from the fire.”

Hearing this, the man lost his composure and tried to grab Lawrence by his lapels. But anticipating that's what he'd do, Lawrence stepped back and grabbed *him* by the lapels. He pulled the man out into the corridor.

“Don't you understand that I'm here *expressly* to negotiate?”

Lawrence's smile remained unchanged. The soldier panicked and moved between them to try to separate them, just as a voice rang out.

“What's the problem?”

Lawrence and the man released each other at once. Keeman's calm and elegant voice was annoyingly well-suited for the Church, unlike his hair which was a complete mess.

“I want to talk with my 'friend.'”

“How direct.. did you think that I would permit that?”

The messenger stood next to Keeman, staring at Lawrence. Cole matched him and stood tall; seeing that made Lawrence feel braver.

“Oh, I don't expect it will be easy.”

“Then how about this? We don't have time to waste on you. But we do have several rooms here..”

He regarded Lawrence with cold eyes. But if he was trying to impress Lawrence with their superior numbers, then that just meant they were already out of options.

“Of course, but I'm hurt that you thought I'd come unprepared.”

“Oh ho?”

“No.. how should I put this? I believe the reason you let me go was because if you took me as well, it would be problematic.”

Keeman seemed displeased. Lawrence pressed on.

“Ms. Eve tried everything to win me over. She even helped me secure my own safety. For example-”

He coughed intentionally.

“For example, she sold me certain papers with your signature on them.”

Keeman's messenger was about to jump him, but Keeman halted him. The corners of his lips rose, but it wasn't a smile; it was a strange snarl-like expression.

“I notice that girl isn't with you now.”

“She's a quick one, and it's only a few papers.. even a young girl could easily smuggle them out of town.”

“..”

Keeman would be the one to suffer if his dealings with Eve were exposed. Regardless of his preparations, if things got any more out of hand he would have to think twice about going ahead with his plan. He had to avoid further complications, and letting Lawrence meet Eve wasn't much of a risk.

“I see.”

His messenger looked up at Keeman after hearing that.

“Bring them in.”

The messenger didn't want to carry out that order, but he nodded. Such praiseworthy loyalty. He shot Lawrence a bitter look of hatred, but Lawrence didn't fear a dog trained to bark as much as a stray with no master.

“If you have anything that holds my interest, I'll pay a fair price.”

Keeman was still a merchant. Lawrence turned to him and nodded with a smile.

“This way.”

They were directed down a staircase along the corridor, into what was possibly a treasure vault, or perhaps a jail used to interrogate heathens. At the bottom of that damp and dark stairwell was an iron door. The messenger knocked on it with an obvious pattern, and a lock was heard unlatching. He then turned to Lawrence before opening the door.

“Don't even think of trying to break her out.”

“I won't.”

Lawrence answered politely, which seemed to anger him even more. The door opened and Lawrence walked in. By the time it closed after Cole, the others in the room seemed to have grasped what was happening.

Eve was seated upon hay in the flickering candlelight, like some captured princess. She grinned as if she had just heard the world's funniest joke. As she did, the rest of her body seemed to calm down. That grin was probably her sly attempt to cover up her nervousness and embarrassment.

“I come with a question.”

“What kind of joke.. would you like to hear?”

Lawrence handed his dagger to the guard, and he and Cole were checked for concealed weapons. In the meantime, he looked around. This was indeed an underground cellar, and there were supplies here and there. The floor was covered with blankets and hay. There was food and water, but Eve’s hands were bound. Lawrence had expected worse, so this eased his mind. She seemed to be alright. But whips and sticks weren't the only things used in interrogations.

“All merchants gather information when they visit a new town.”

“I see.. I’m surprised he let you pass...oh, only the boy is with you.. of course..”

Eve's mind was still sharp. She quickly pieced together how Lawrence made it this far.

“Flowers won't be enough for that girl you left behind on her own.”

“..last time already earned me a punch to the face.”

“Haha.. She does seem rather strong-willed.”

If this was a chat in an outside shop in the sunshine, then it would have been an enjoyable day off. But unfortunately, the guard was watching them with a half-drawn longsword, and on the other side of the door his messenger (and perhaps Keeman himself) was listening in.

“In any case, it’s a relief you haven’t been reduced to having to eat bread by tearing it into small pieces.”

“Hmph. Keeman doesn’t have the balls to hurt me. Reynolds is too poor, so he must have found a rich supporter in the north. Rich people are few in numbers in this area, and Keeman doesn't have a clue how I fit into this. They're barely man enough to scold me.”

Her sarcasm was clearly also directed at the longsword-carrying guard. But based on her personality, she wouldn't even bother laughing at someone if they weren't somehow valuable to her, so he was probably the one who brought her food and water.

“I've told Keeman all of this. But Reynold's letter stole the ladders from under both our feet. If he's using my contract with Keeman as a means to control me.. well, I guess I’m just that useful.”

The tone of the conversation had changed, even if her tone of voice hadn't. The room had gone so silent they even heard Cole gulping.

“Then he really does have powerful and wealthy backers?”

“Keeman suspects it. But Reynolds is running the most profitable business in the north, so we can't figure out who'd be rich *and* willing to support him. Of course he might also just be placing an order without the funds to back it, taking advantage of somebody's wisdom.”

“And his aim?”

Eve smiled.

“To take money from those who want the Narwhale, including us.”

Lawrence smiled. Eve was, after all, the one who had taught him that there were people who would approach problems in unconventional ways.

“You mean, by saying, ‘If you don't want your painstakingly-made once-in-a-lifetime bet disrupted, then pay up.’”

“The northerners are fighting a losing battle. It wouldn't be strange for someone to suggest a way to grab the remaining profit. There must be many people doing that, since although it'll take a lot for such a plan to be convincing, someone seems willing to pay for it.. Although we should be the only ones daring enough to suggest a plan like this to sell the Narwhale.”

Given that Keeman had ready access to the Church, and could thus imprison Eve, Lawrence could tell that this daring plan had been carefully thought out. A lot of money must have been spent for this. Keeman would rather cancel the deal and let Reynolds get some of the profits than risk his investment being a total loss.

“But since Keeman has me here, that means Reynolds must have money to work with. Keeman fears I'll betray him to the northerners, so he must be keeping me here because he realized how likely it is that someone's backing Reynolds. I.. I came to you because I was concerned about that.”

Eve was an ex-noble of Winfield, the Kingdom across the channel that took half a day to cross. If someone made a diagram of the powerful elites connected to her, it would be a tangled web filling an entire page. Such elites couldn't act without a good reason, but once they had one they could do anything. It would be easy for them to arrange a secret agreement for the Narwhale.

On top of that, they could earn more if they made Eve their scapegoat. They'd kill two birds with one stone. No one would know her ultimate fate, whether she survived or didn't even resemble a human anymore. Giving the Narwhale to the southerners was probably Eve's greatest wish right now.

“I didn't expect this.”

She spoke softly, before rolling up the blanket and moving toward Lawrence.

“If you know this much, you’ll only need to watch the city for a few more days to figure it all out. But whether Reynolds has the money, or can get the money somewhere, this will be our final meeting.”

The slightly relieved tension in the air seemed to have made her talkative, but now she was staring at the ground and yawning. She’d either said enough or was simply exhausted. Even her noble spirit was wavering. She would have seemed divine to Lawrence, if not for what she said next.

“The ones here are the skilled ones.. I’m grateful that I can die without pain.”

Cole cried out, and hearing this, Eve looked upon him with a smile.

“So they’re going to destroy the evidence?”

“Of course.. I do have a mouth, after all.”

She shrugged and spoke in a relaxed tone. How many people in the world could shrug their shoulders while saying such things? Lawrence was about to speak up, but she smiled like a young girl before his mouth had opened.

“Even in my final moments, you’re still willing to listen to my childish rambling. I’m so happy for that.”

She turned away and stared off into space. She had a beautiful face.

“After all, even if the feast has been terrible, we should be thankful if the final dish is delicious.”

Lawrence’s heart beat painfully, but not because he pitied her. Indeed, he’d decided to continue traveling for similar reasons – just to keep smiling together with Holo. But if that was truly enough for him, he wouldn’t be standing here right now.

“Is there anything I can do to save you?”

The guard was shocked to hear Lawrence ask this, and so was Eve.. even more so.

“Is he *serious*?”

Eve looked up as she replied. She wasn’t looking at Lawrence, but the guard.

“..sorry, I can’t tell. I’m no merchant, unfortunately.”

If things got serious, one of them would be holding the axe and the other would be having her head chopped off. And yet they were chatting like friends.

“But I *can* say this-”

“You don’t have to say that, he already knows it.”

Eve interrupted the guard's statement to Lawrence. The man watched Eve in silence for a moment before closing his mouth. Lawrence understood. Complete despair could bring a sense of calm.. but while a glimmer of hope existed, the pain was unbearable.

“If there's any chance for my salvation, it's this..”

Her expression was even calm now, but it wasn’t because she had a heart of iron.

“That Reynolds has prepared enough money on his own.”

Her eyes closed.

“But I'm so tired.. I haven't slept for two days.”

It's said that fortune comes to us even while we sleep, but the next time she woke up might be her last. Yet here she was, still willing to sleep. She probably didn’t want to talk anymore. Indeed, Lawrence also felt that he'd heard enough, so he called the guard. He had no idea if the man was only hired to watch over her or if he had already been working for Keeman.

Cole stared at Lawrence questioningly as he received back his dagger. The discussion either disagreed with him, or he hadn't understood. Lawrence silently placed his hand on the boy's head, then spoke as he left the room.

“Sweet dreams.”

She raised her hand elegantly in response.

Lawrence and Cole were greeted by the messenger's glare as they began to walk back up the stairs. He'd likely report everything they just said to Keeman, but Lawrence was sure it was all useless. Lawrence and Eve were merchants, and nothing was less trustworthy than the words a merchant spoke. They engaged in genuine conversation by other means.

“Did you have a productive discussion?”

They noticed ink on Keeman's face as they entered the room. He was preoccupied with a letter, and spoke to them without raising his face.

“Yes. She’s quite the talker.”

Keeman quickly signed the letter, handed it to his assistant, then began reading the next letter in front of him. The contents of those letters would be varied: negotiations, threats, even treaties. The larger something became the more difficult it was to juggle its power, as the energy required to manage it also grew.

“Is the deal I was mediating going to be canceled?”

Keeman stopped writing his response to the letter he'd just finished reading. It seemed he needed to think about Lawrence's question before answering.

“Consider this a theoretical problem. Even if I lock the baker in my own shop, I can still go to his bakery and buy bread, right?”

“If the money and goods are there, you won’t even need others to make the exchange.”

“True, but we also need to make sure there's still bread to sell. Of course if we really want it, we could always let the baker return to the bakery.. but then he might resent us. We just happened to hear that the baker bought poison, so we panicked and locked him up. But-”

“The only way to know if the poison was being baked into the bread, or just used to take care of mice, is when the bread’s been eaten.”

The sound of Keeman’s handwriting resumed, though he did finally look up at Lawrence.

“Or when the mice die.”

Before one fully understood a situation, they needed to lock up the dangerous actors to keep it from getting worse. That's the kind of subtle logic someone like Keeman, who managed a lot of people, would use. He couldn't torture Eve, because that might put him in danger. But when things got tough people would always try to remove the root cause of the problem. That was the kind of logic even Holo would use.

“In any case, the wolf seems to have taken a liking to you. So please be mindful of your own safety. But then.. you already have your own way of protecting yourself, don't you?”

If Keeman was being this satirical about Lawrence's earlier threat, then how would he take it if Lawrence revealed that Holo didn't really have any incriminating documents? The thought brought a smile to his face and he thanked Keeman.

“Then please show our guests out.”

Keeman said this to the man beside him, as if to signal the end of the conversation, then

resumed his work. The man nodded politely and escorted Lawrence to the door. If the guests who came in didn't all leave, it would mean trouble.

"I'll remember this."

Keeman's messenger spoke under his breath, practically throwing Lawrence and Cole out of the Church. The door was shut loudly behind them before Lawrence even had time to reply. The guards saw the whole scene, so Lawrence intentionally brushed his clothes off before thanking them.

"Thanks for your hard work."

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Lawrence and Cole didn't return to the inn after leaving the church. They instead went to the factory district where smiths made daggers and horseshoes. According to what he'd heard, the district produced forty or fifty daggers a week. Even villages quite far from Gerube had daggers stamped with their emblem.

They walked in quietly. Lawrence was lost in thought and Cole seemed unwilling to speak. Death was common on long and frugal journeys due to disease, starvation, injury or other accidents. It was also common for students like Cole to go on their own kinds of journeys in their pursuit for the truth. And yet, Cole's face was stoic. He was surely struggling to accept the path Eve was on.

"Does it make you angry?"

Cole hesitated, then shook his head, then finally corrected himself and nodded honestly.

"It's only because of Holo, and my selfishness, that you're stuck in this situation. No one will blame you if you quit."

Lawrence went on to explain how dangerous this situation could get, but Cole soon shook his head and raised his face.

"If closing my eyes would make the bad things in life go away, I would have done so already."

His was a third and different perspective compared to Lawrence and Holo's. Lawrence nodded and walked on with the boy in tow. But Cole was still finding it difficult to face the truth head-on.

"There's.. still hope for Ms. Eve, isn't there?"

Merchants liked to calculate odds and take risks, but found promises difficult to make. Lawrence chose his reply carefully.

“Where there's a will, there's a way.”

What Eve suggested as her only hope was for Reynolds to gather enough funds to buy the Narwhale, for himself or the northerners. In that way the situation would simplify into a basic goods exchange. And then, like a burglar too frightened to breathe after hearing a noise, Keeman would gradually begin the post-processing work.

It all seemed rather bleak for Reynolds after one considered his earnings, and even a layperson could estimate them. The likelihood he could succeed was a tenth of one percent.. and perhaps even a tenth of that.

“But won't he have enough already? From the scheme with the copper coins, I mean?”

Cole was the one who discovered Reynold's manipulation of the crates of copper coins being shipped to him on the Roam river. The number of crates he received differed from the number he shipped out; he was receiving fewer crates than he sent across the sea, despite shipping the same total number of coins.

“The only thing that we can be hopeful for is that he earned a little money from his tax evasion scheme. That's it. It won't be enough for him to buy the Narwhale.”

“..”

Cole stared at the ground as if lost in an sea of thought. Lawrence had the same bad trait; he would ignore everything around him when he got stuck that way. But when he saw someone making the same mistakes he had the urge to correct them, so Lawrence knocked the boy's head gently.

“While it's important for us to think..”

“Huh?”

“..we must first protect ourselves. We're in a situation now where we have to take precautions.”

He pushed Cole's back, urging him to move faster. Cole ran once he realized why. He was so innocent that if Lawrence told him everything he would have been too nervous.

The roads in the smith's factory area were wide for a worker's district. They were used to transport heavy equipment, so they were well-built, but only locals would be able to navigate through them quickly. They wound around like a maze, and were littered with obstacles. Cole grabbed the tail of his cloak and ran.

“Wait, you bastards!”

It wasn't rare for a merchant to chase after thieves. But it *was* rare to see ruffians chasing after a merchant. The smiths looked up from their work in curiosity and, having been seen, the ruffians gave up their pursuit. By the time Lawrence and Cole fled the district, they were nowhere in sight.

But they may not have given up. With their knowledge of the area they could be using another route to lay a trap. Cole looked up at Lawrence like a loyal dog waiting for a command, but he seemed to already know what was coming.

“Anytime now..”

Just after Lawrence spoke, a beggar exited the alley in front of them.

“Ah!”

Cole gasped, but they silently plunged into the alley after the beggar. The roads of the district may have been difficult to navigate, but Lawrence and Cole couldn't even run through this alley. The beggar made it look easy, but it took almost all their energy just to keep up. It seemed to drag on forever, but just as Lawrence was breaking a sweat the beggar finally stopped and looked back at them.

“Here should be safe enough.”

Though she was panting, Lawrence could see her face happily beaming out from under the hood of the shabby jacket Cole had lent her. Such games of pursuit made her wolf blood boil.

“It seems you two have met the fox.”

“She seemed better off than I expected.”

“Fair enough, but..”

Holo stared at Cole, who had taken back his jacket and hidden himself inside it.

“Did she look like *this*?”

Holo smiled, pulling Cole's cheeks up into a smile as well. A knot left untangled might cause problems and danger later on, and if something happened the rope would be thrown away.

“Persistent, yet pure and calm.. yes?”

“..so you *don't* hate her as much as you claim.”

Holo's smile widened to reveal her fangs and she pointed her chin northward.

“There has been a riot at the port. They are still fighting.”

“What happened?”

Cole beat Lawrence to the question. Lawrence felt bad to admit it, but when others around him were also nervous, it helped him calm down. The situation just kept changing, and no matter how alert or well-prepared they were they'd miss their chance if they just stood there. They had to take that chance when they saw it. Lawrence nodded to get Holo to continue.

“That Reynolds who seemed so humble last night - he is quite the actor. Today he seemed full of pride, strong enough to easily pay back those who have made him suffer.”

“He was negotiating? With the south?”

“He kept shouting that, as a customer, he had the right to see what he was buying. I harbor no hatred for the people he was shouting at, but their nervousness made me want to laugh.”

Lawrence and Cole looked at one another. If Reynolds wanted to see the Narwhale, then it was obvious where he'd be going next.

“As I expected, your ears cannot hear them. They are three blocks away from us.”

“But then.. he really *does* have enough money to buy it..”

Holo tilted her head at Cole, who silently avoided her gaze as she fiddled with his face. At the same time he scrunched up his face, Lawrence noticed something strange.

“He has enough?”

Cole was the first to speak. Holo turned her ears toward the dark alley and replied.

“They fought with words. He was yelling to see the Narwhale, and they were yelling to see his money. Because he seemed serious, our side pushed back just as hard.”

“Mr. Lawrence..”

“Hmm.. But, why? What does this mean?”

Holo's shoulders were trembling out of laughter. She had decided not to think about it anymore. Her smile was proclaiming that it was the man's responsibility to save a captured woman.

“For Reynolds to have that much cash is strange. Even if he found a backer, it would take time to gather it all up, so he must have had some kept hidden away, somehow..”

But then there was no reason for Reynolds to wait until a riot broke out, and the longer he waited the more likely it was that someone desperate like Keeman would screw things up beyond repair. There was also the other problem Lawrence had discovered while they were searching for the wolf-god's bones: moving that much cash was like moving a giant – people were sure to notice.

So how had Reynolds managed to gather that much cash in secret? Lawrence knew how meticulous the merchants in Gerube were. They closely observed the delta and knew what transactions were taking place; who, what, where, and how much. Since goods weren't invisible, of course Keeman would assume Reynolds didn't have the cash. Somehow, that was the furthest thing from the truth.

“I do not know how. But it should be easy enough to find out.”

Holo stretched and breathed in deeply. She squinted as if remembering something from the past, then looked off into the distance. It was probably where Reynolds was heading.

“We know their next move. They are going to the church.”

“But how? How does he have the money? Whose money is it?”

Keeman and Eve were already at the church. What would happen once Reynolds arrived there with that much money? Money was money no matter where it came from, but where it came from was still of vital importance.

Keeman and his backers must be terrified right now. They already had to worry about destroying evidence, and now their subordinates were probably fleeing with secret documents like rats from a sinking ship. Who'd be in the worst position when people learned of Eve's captivity? Keeman, of course, and his boss, Jeeda.

It would be impossible for Reynolds not to notice the contract between Keeman and Eve. Being a core supporter of the northern landowners, he'd also know about her disappearance. It wouldn't take much to figure out where she was, and then trap all of them.

Being on the defensive meant Keeman could only run. He would probably force Eve to run through the streets as well. But Keeman wasn't the only one with extra eyes on the lookout, so key figures like him and Eve wouldn't be allowed to escape. Their positions would only be weaker once they were discovered. This was the very definition of “being up against the wall.”

“But Mr. Lawrence! That means Ms. Eve will be..!”

Cole grabbed Lawrence's shoulder as he shouted. Keeman was out of time to figure out how Reynolds got the money, so what would he do? Simple. He'd get all the tight-lipped people

around him to tell the same story. There was no reason to assume that Eve would be part of that group.

“You have three choices.”

An incarnation of a wolf who had slept in wheat fields and tried to avoid being treated like a god was now staring up at the lantern above them while speaking.

“One, give up. Two, ask me to handle things. Three-”

“Go find out for ourselves.”

He spied the faintest trace of a smile across her face before she continued.

“And what shall we do once we arrive?”

“Things will work out in the end. When you're out of other options, there's nothing better than good sophistry. There's no way to confirm if its true or not, so in a pinch the one who makes the incontestable suggestion wins.”

“If we can convince Keeman, that fox may yet be saved.”

Cole's eyes darted between their faces as they talked, forgetting to blink. He knew they were acting this way despite knowing he didn't want to see it.

“Are you confident that's true?”

Lawrence couldn't bear to look at Cole while he and Holo spoke. Growing up also meant learning how to deceive others and even oneself.

“Even if I am not, we must act.”

“Oh no..”

“Not every problem has a solution.”

At those words, tears started welling up in Cole's eyes.

“Then, then, Ms. Holo-”

“If you break into the church, can you be certain that everyone who's there will be safe?”

Lawrence intentionally lowered his voice and cut Cole off. Holo scratched her face and tilted her head before replying to him.

“If the church does not collapse after I break through the stained glass, yes. Otherwise..”

Lawrence remembered the church's clock-tower. Anything piled up that high, even toy bricks, was asking to fall. At worst many people would be buried under the rubble. But if they broke through the main entrance of the church they would be met with many spears and swords. Holo wasn't almighty.

“We can still simply run away and not end up in trouble. Some humans are evil, yes, but not all of them. Surely not everyone is our enemy?”

They could certainly take their chances and run. Once Keeman's dealings became public knowledge, he'd suffer the most no matter how one looked at it. Lawrence would just be a poor merchant who was being used against his will. There should be a few people who would support him.

“..”

Cole wasn't even drying his tears. He just stared at the floor. He'd journeyed to the south on his own to save his village. That didn't just take a tough mind, but a gentle one as well. Even Eve had noticed his honest qualities and treated him gently because of them.

“We have many options, but only one desired outcome.”

“Then shouldn't we work backwards from that outcome, rather than starting with the options?”

Travelers sometimes had to leave behind luggage or friends, or even pass by other injured travelers. Lawrence had had people cling desperately to his clothes, or even pull his hair. But what of Eve? As he recalled she simply said matter-of-factly that she was tired and wanted to sleep. She was probably just preparing for the worst.

There were always many options, but usually there was only one outcome. Complete reversals of fortune were rare, because natural outcomes were hard to fight against.

“Alright, so if Reynolds really *did* tamper with the coin shipments..”

“Hmm?”

“..based on what Cole discovered he should have saved a bit of money.”

Once when he was attacked by wolves on a snowy mountain, Lawrence and his party had to leave behind a friend who had broken his leg and flee into a wood cutter's home. They couldn't bring themselves to quietly listen, so they spent the night chatting merrily as if they were drunk.

“A tariff would be twenty or thirty percent of the value of a crate, at most. But that's really

steep when it's a crate full of coins. And inspections and restrictions are even more strict for crates of coins, so pulling it off wouldn't be easy."

Lawrence grabbed Cole's shoulders and motioned for Holo to start walking. In case they decided to flee, they needed to do so now amidst the chaos in town.

"Hmm. If the scheme was done in reverse it would work better."

"In reverse?"

As he asked, Holo straddled a wooden stick that was against a wall and replied.

"Indeed. Fifty-eight crates come in, sixty leave. That is two full crates of coins.. quite a lot."

"Oh, right. They could even receive sixty and ship sixty back out."

"But that would be pointless."

"You think so? He could just fill the crates with fewer coins. Then each time, he'd skim more than two full crates' worth of coins. But that way Diva Company would suffer a loss."

But what was the point of doing that? Lawrence thought it over.

"Eh?"

Cole suddenly shouted and looked up at them, but Lawrence was too lost in thought to be surprised.

"I just said something strange, didn't I?"

Holo stared at them as if she didn't know what they were talking about. Lawrence was searching what he'd just said for any details he might have missed. Reynolds' coin scheme should only profit him slightly, unless he was causing a big loss for the Diva Company or Winfield Kingdom.

"The number of coins wouldn't change.. what would is the number of crates, the tariff, and.. and?"

The words stuck in Lawrence's throat. He didn't know. His mind was stuck in a blur of thoughts, unable to consider even the simplest and most basic of things. Cole was retching as if choking, and by the time Lawrence realized it was the boy being nervous Cole finally spoke out.

"The payments! If he can't do the reverse of what they're doing with the crates of coins, then he just has to reconsider his payments! That wouldn't be a problem for Diva, because--"

“If the accounts are settled in the end, it doesn’t matter what happens in between.. is that it? What other orders would Reynolds accept from upstream? He could have a huge amount of cash, and a reason to keep it hidden away. That must be it.”

Everything they'd seen in Gerube finally fell into place as if tied by one string. This would not only explain how Reynolds could gather so much cash so quickly, but also the other odd goings-on around him. The money *was* Reynolds’.

Regardless of who Reynolds’ backer was, they’d live far, far away. They wouldn’t know the current situation, and when news finally reached them it would already be over. That’s why he involved the Church. Their involvement would legitimize and sanctify the deal. If things turned out profitably, all the better for the Church.

This really wasn’t funny, but it still made Lawrence laugh. He wasn’t going to let Reynolds run away with the profits. Everything was in his reach, he just had to grasp it.

“Let's go.”

Lawrence began running, but..

“Hey, why aren't you two-”

He turned back angrily.

“I am not going.”

Holo stood her ground and smiled back at him.

“..don't be that way now! It's alright, I'm not being irrational! I've got it under control!”

Holo shook her head.

“That is not what I mean.”

“Then-”

She cut him off before he could add “what *do* you mean?”

“I do not wish to see you showing off in front of other females.”

She said this like an embarrassed young maiden, then stuck her tongue out playfully. Where had she learned to be so devious? He could only smile back, knowing that's what she wanted him to do.

“You take my breath away.”

“Hmph. Then you will just cast me aside and run to her?”

He shut his eyes and sighed deeply. Eve's words had been prophetic; flowers truly wouldn't be good enough for Holo.

“Cole!”

“Yes! Leave it to me!”

Lawrence still saw tears on the boy's face, but his smile was genuine. If Lawrence had to comfortably leave Holo in someone else's hands without feeling jealous, it could only be Cole.



“Oh ho.. how amusing.”

Holo’s smile reappeared before she released a mild sigh.

“Very well, off you go. They may be parading about slowly, but they must nearly be there.”

Lawrence took her meaning and immediately turned around to run. He was well aware of how dangerous it was to turn one’s back on someone in an alley, but he still did so. When he looked back he saw both of them waving at him. That quick glance was more than enough; he ran with determination to the church.

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The church seemed very busy when he arrived. As night fell the normal citizenry headed home for supper. Only merchants would be here now, all curious to see what was happening but too nervous to get close enough to get swept up into things.

A path had been cleared to the church entrance for Reynolds and his associates. The mood felt like the calm before a storm. During this relatively peaceful moment, Lawrence made his way across the wide road and rushed up to the entrance.

“..”

At first the soldiers and merchants had no idea what was happening. Perhaps they figured Lawrence was Reynold’s messenger, since they silently stared at him while he ran. It was only when Lawrence tried to enter the church that a soldier finally bellowed at him.

Of course that didn’t stop him, since the door was wide open for the arrival of Reynolds. He ran without hesitation into the church, and to the far end of the corridor. He thought he glimpsed objects on the floor in the candlelight; probably letters discussing the trade.

The door to Keeman’s room was open a crack. Lawrence pushed his way in, but no one was actually there. The swiftness with which things were moving almost made him lose his footing. *Please don’t let me be too late*, he gasped, and ran down the stairs to the underground jail.

He saw light; someone had to be there. But the quietness around him made Lawrence apprehensive. When a man finally took notice of him and began walking up the stairs, the sight of blood on his clothes sent a wave of terror through Lawrence.

“Y-you..”

But luck was on Lawrence’s side. The man was shorter and the stairs were tall, giving Lawrence the high ground. He belted the man in the face, slamming his head against the wall and making him slump down on the stairs.

Lawrence never even noticed the silvered dagger he was clutching in his hand. He didn't even stop to think as he pushed open the iron doors and flew into the room. When he saw what was happening he shouted with the full might of his entire body.

“Please stop!”

Only one person didn't flinch in shock; Keeman turned around first to face him. Eve's guard then turned his head as well, with his thick hands still wrapped around her throat. A vacant expression was on Eve's face. Her arms were bound behind her back and her legs were tied; clearly they didn't want her to struggle. If they had to slit her throat they'd be the ones who'd have to clean it up.

“Stop! You don't have to do this!!”

The guard loosened his grip on Eve and turned to Keeman. She wasn't dead yet. Just as Lawrence made that analysis Keeman sprang up to him, his hair a mess and his face cold and emotionless.

“Who put you up this?! Who bought you off!? Speak, merchant!!”

Keeman had finally lost his composure, and even chewed the nails of the hand that now grabbed Lawrence's collar. Lawrence could finally get through to him. He bent down slightly to make Keeman stumble, then grabbed Keeman's waist and flipped him onto his back. Keeman saw the floor and ceiling switch places.

“Gah!!”

Keeman squealed like a squashed frog, and struggled violently under Lawrence.

“Release Eve! Immediately!”

Lawrence sat on Keeman, holding a knife to his throat. The guard had no quarrel with Eve, but he was likely an experienced killer. Lawrence had no choice but wait for him to make a decision. Having watched Keeman lose his composure, the guard seemed to feel the jig was up. He unhanded Eve and raised his arms.

“Is she still breathing?”

Lawrence's question was answered promptly.

“She should just be unconscious.”

It wasn't difficult for an accomplished killer to strangle someone and then finish the job once they lost consciousness. It all came down to how long someone could stay conscious if they were being strangled.

“Mer.. chant..”

Keeman could barely speak. Perhaps he was finally calming down, or perhaps he just had the wind knocked out of him, but he spoke with pain while glaring at Lawrence with one eye.

“I’ve got some great news for you, assuming Eve's still alive.”

“What do you mean?”

The guard lightly slapped Eve's cheek and she groaned in response. She was alive. Lawrence was amazed that he could be this relieved that someone who tried to kill him was still alive. Keeman's face was twisted in pain. He probably knew Reynolds was coming to the church, and that it was only a matter of time before Eve was discovered and taken to him.

“Reynolds managed to prepare enough money on his own.”

“Impossible!”

Keeman nearly rose to his feet despite having a knife at his throat. He was that surprised. But it was beyond doubt that Reynolds *had* prepared the money on his own. There was no other way.

“I'm a merchant, but it'll be too hard for me to profit off this on my own. If Reynolds wins then I lose. That's our relationship;.I can't let him win or I'll lose my own profit.”

Keeman was stunned. He obviously didn't know what Lawrence was talking about, so Lawrence turned away from him and looked at Eve.

“What.. have you.. figured out?”

Eve spoke hoarsely as she sat up with the guard's help. Despite having just escaped hell, that was her first question.

“I came to this city looking for information about the wolf-god's bones..”

Lawrence didn't beat around the bush. He revealed everything he knew right there and then. Eve and Keeman were more than capable of telling whether he was lying or not. Ultimately-

“Mr. Lawrence, please get off of me.”

Keeman stared at the ceiling and spoke calmly as Eve gently smiled. Lawrence obeyed. After all, Keeman and Eve were merchants of higher standing.

“Can you do it?”

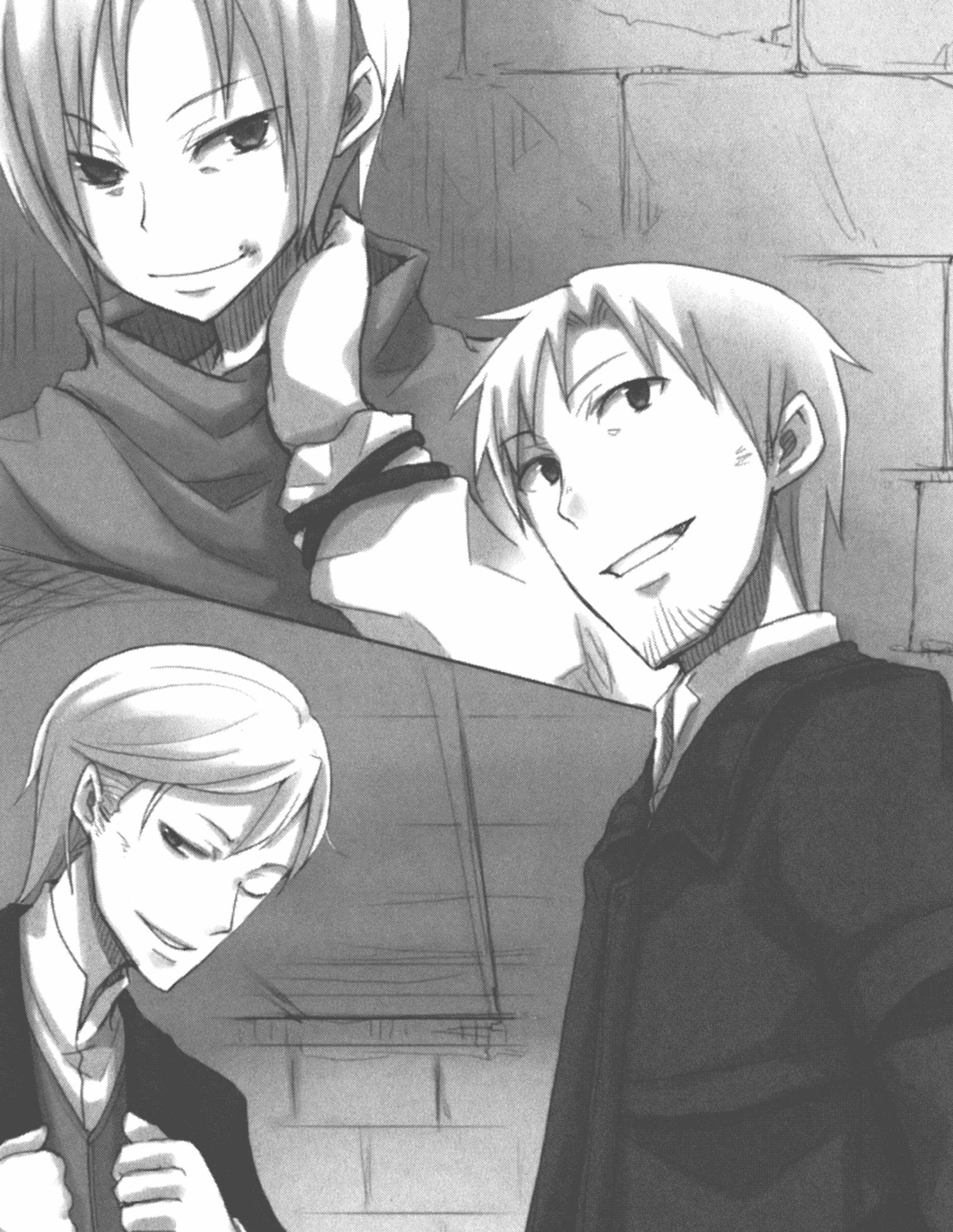
Lawrence put away his knife as he asked. Keeman coughed and sat up, tidying his hair and clothes.

“I must. Although..”

He paused and looked at the person he almost killed, then spoke without emotion.

“..that’s assuming she doesn’t betray us.”

“She still has a chance to earn money.”



Eve made a fist, and intentionally caressed her neck with it.

“God seemed to look like Arold.. I'll have to confirm that next time.”

“At least we'll earn enough to afford the trip to heaven.”

Once they were spurred into action, they worked swiftly. Lawrence had confidence in them, having experienced first-hand how fearsomely they wielded their power. Eve now looked like one of those people the Church had “reborn”; she spoke with sincerity.

“Ugh. Merchants.. we're all insane and sinful.”

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The procession that headed to the church looked quite odd. Reynolds was at the front, with retainers carrying boxes of gold coins behind him. He was like a bride rushing down a long alley with her dowries in tow. The coins carried into the church shone brightly, as if to defy the glory of the Lord.

Judging by their size, each box likely contained a hundred coins, and there were fifteen of them. As if to show off, those boxes were placed right in front of the altar containing the Narwhale. Reynolds proudly stood tall at the priest's pulpit, representing the southerners of faith.

It wasn't uncommon for big-shot merchants to be involved in deals worth thousands of coins, but it was uncommon for them to be paying in cash. Merchants had to form contracts, since cash was as rare and valuable as jewels.

Many people would be involved in trades when this much hard currency was involved, and someone was sure to notice when such large numbers of coins were being collected. Of course, for large payments made in coins, the transaction also had to be properly recorded by money-changers. Therefore, it wasn't strange to see others to be sitting and praying in the dim candlelight.

Reynold's sudden attack was flawless.

“As you can see, I've brought the coins you requested to the house of the holy Lord! Now fulfill your end of the contract!”

His belly, and the loose skin on his face, were quite prominent. In poor company those features would only make him seem destitute, but here and now they were dignified symbols. His melodic voice rang out proudly and strongly, like an opera singer giving the performance of their life.

“I, the second owner of D'Jean Company, hereby proclaim that this trade shall be recorded in

the name of that company!”

The sound of splashing was then heard; the Narwhale had stirred, perhaps in response to Reynold's voice or at the tension looming in the air. After that the church became silent as a dead lake. Lawrence turned away from that scene, and walked back down the corridor.

As Reynolds had been leading his team to the church, a man claiming to be sent by Jeeda had visited Keeman but been immediately dismissed. Keeman wasn't afraid. If his plan failed he would be held responsible, but he did not want Jeeda to play any part in its success.

None of that worried Lawrence, because Keeman and Eve were preparing a sharp weapon to stab into Reynolds. When faced with their combined rage, surely no merchant would emerge unscathed. Lawrence felt sorry for Reynolds as he recalled the image of him proudly strutting on the pulpit.

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“That's everything I've managed to figure out.”

“After tariffs, shipping, and hush-money, it should be about this much. I've seen Diva's shop. They'd be able to pull this off.”

Keeman excelled at deciphering words and playing with numbers. Eve knew everything about the area along the Roam river. Together, it was trivial for them to figure out the dealings of one company. It was a scary thing for a horse-and-wagon merchant to witness.

“Mr. Lawrence, how were things at the altar?”

“As expected. Reynolds is pressuring the southerners. Naturally, they can't immediately respond. That should buy us enough time.”

Lawrence wasn't participating in their deliberations. He was merely reporting his observations. That made him feel strangely happy.

“Then, shall we go for it?”

As soon as Keeman asked, Eve nodded. Of course, Lawrence followed suit. Their plans for sole ownership of the Narwhale were no longer feasible, but they could still make a profit. Simply put, Reynolds had taken advantage of Eve and Keeman as they argued over how to split their profits. Clearly that was what he had been waiting for.

“Here, this is your final job.”

Eve didn't even wait for the ink to dry before she rolled up the letter she handed to Lawrence. Her mocking tone brought an apologetic smile to Keeman's face. Lawrence had a hunch as to

why she wasn't smiling as well, but he took the letter anyway; he didn't expect her to confirm his hunch.

"I had hoped to meet you on the river."

"..all the better that I had bid you farewell under the sun, after being cheated by you as a nemesis."

Eve squinted but didn't reply. Keeman seemed to have grasped how his original plan would have played out, if their friendly banter was any indication. He smiled bitterly and hung his head in relief.

"Then please wait here, good sir and madam."

With those words, Lawrence parted. Keeman's messenger glared at Lawrence with hatred from his post beside the door. Apparently, the dry blood on his clothes was his own; Eve had kicked him in the nose as he tied her up. Lawrence unconsciously flashed him a business smile. Their differences just couldn't be resolved, he thought, as he made his way down the corridor.

Several people were gathered around the candles discussing something. Were they still trying to scheme their way out of this? Or were they already discussing where to flee to? Well, no matter. Lawrence now held the letter that would ruin the "celebration" taking place at the altar. What they were discussing was irrelevant, it didn't shake his confidence.

He was the main character in this play right now. Because that was what he was thinking, his expression must have seemed quite strange as he walked up to the door guards. He informed them of the situation, then walked up to the altar. A strange atmosphere filled the room, and only Reynolds was wearing a brave smile.

"Mr. Reynolds."

Having finally made his way to the altar, Lawrence murmured quietly to Reynolds. They weren't strangers, and Reynolds even greeted him with the same look of surprise one might show an old friend.

"What brings you here? What's the matter?"

He put an excellent act. Indeed, he was a force to be reckoned with.

"Oh, well, a lady asked me to deliver this letter to you."

Reynolds clearly understood that Lawrence was talking about Eve.

"Oh.. oh."

For a split-second all of his repugnant greed flashed across his face; his expression played marvelously against the candlelight. He was probably still hoping to ally with Eve for capital, and assumed this would spare him some effort.

“It seems to be a trade request.”

Reynolds grinned happily as Lawrence handed him the letter. It seemed he *would* be able to manipulate Eve as he'd hoped. Reynolds spread the letter out excitedly, like a boy opening a letter from his girlfriend. Lawrence praised himself inwardly for not laughing out loud, then read the letter to him.

“Given that Mr. Reynolds wishes a large business contract, we would first like to confirm his account statements, which will be conducted by a representative of my company with good eyes.”

“Ah.. hmm..”

“Regarding copper coins, we are certain we have sufficient evidence to show that you received fifty-eight crates for Diva Company, yet sent sixty to Winfield Kingdom. At first we assumed you were simply evading customs tariffs.”

Sweat poured down Reynold's face as Lawrence murmured the letter's contents.

“But in reality, you weren't avoiding tariffs to earn a little money on the side. You were working with Diva to transfer large amounts of capital downstream.”

If the crates were packed differently, the number of coins in each could differ. This would allow them to secretly transfer the money.

“You received payment for sixty crates of coins from Winfield, and paid Diva for fifty-eight. When viewed as separate transactions, your accounts seem balanced. But whether the number of coins in the crates - or the payment money - add up.. well, we can't tell that from just your ledger.”

Reynold's face was ghostly pale. His eyes had been flitting about randomly, and finally stopped to look at Lawrence.

“But if we compare the imports and exports, we see that two crates worth of payment remain at D'Jean Company each time. Furthermore, this same technique could be applied to other business transactions.”

That's what Lawrence had said when he heard Cole's solution to the coin riddle. Ascertaining whether Reynolds had used this method was tricky, as there were many goods he could have skimmed in this way.. just like how there were many people in the world believing themselves

to be main characters.

“Copper ore, lead, tin, and brass; even the products made of them.. as long as they’re regulated and have a round shape. The mines in the Roef region are rich with many different metals, correct?”

“No, however..”

“Will you suggest that this is simply a transfer of capital? If so, that's incorrect. It isn't. Do you want our company to send people to Diva's? When we noticed your illegal transactions, we first suspected you were only scheming to save on tariffs. But taxes are vital; imagine how bad it would be if Diva wasn't willing to pay?”

Reynolds face was twitching like a jittery child's. Killing two birds with one stone; that's how most people would consider this method.

“Diva can also evade taxes by trading this way with you. Each time they do, they lose two crates of coins. They won't profit, but they wouldn't have to pay the taxes. And so-”

Lawrence paused and coughed.

“What do you want? How much? What's your aim? Tell me!”

Reynolds must have been caught off-guard, but he was still able to stay in control and didn't openly shout at Lawrence. Lawrence put a hand on his shoulder to calm him, and smiled.

“I'm but a simple messenger. Such things..”

Lawrence turned his gaze to the corridor.

“..will have to be discussed with my two employers.”

“..”

Reynolds didn't fall to his knees, possibly to preserve some dignity. He knew he had no chance to bribe those two. They were the kinds of misers who could kill with just a smile.

“And so, I bid you farewell. This merchant must continue his adventure to find the wolf-god's bones.”

With that, Lawrence turned and walked away. As he passed by Keeman and Eve, they all shook hands. They would surely roast Reynolds quite nicely. He walked down the darkened corridor and passed the other chatting merchants and their uncomfortable expressions.

He wasn't a hero. He wasn't even a great merchant. He'd never been on the public stage. He

didn't even have subordinates he could control on a whim. He walked out of the main door of the church, feeling like just another long shadow being cast by its torches. Looking back, he saw the majestic structure being lit from underneath by those torches and the terrifying atmosphere it created.

He walked down its front steps, off into the crowd, and pressed onward. It wasn't that he felt confident. But he still had a place to go. To familiar scenery in a familiar building. He walked through the open door of that place, hearing the floor creak as he climbed to the third floor.

His eyes hadn't yet accustomed to the darkness, but he instinctively remembered where the door to his room was. He stopped in front of it, and knocked. Noises were heard and it soon opened, letting candlelight and the smells of food spill out. It was a scene he could never have hoped for as a lonely traveling merchant.

His life had been terribly busy of late, but he still smiled and announced himself.

"I'm back."

Holo and Cole replied.

"Welcome back."

Slowly, the door closed behind him.

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Epilogue

In the end, they were unable to discover what kind of ridiculous deal had been foisted upon Reynolds by Keeman and Eve. But, since the Narwhale deal between Reynolds (who was thought to have fallen into deep trouble) and the Southerners was settled rather quickly, he must have accepted it despite knowing the Rowen Trading Guild would be involved.

On paper, Reynolds had purchased the Narwhale. But in return for keeping quiet about his fraudulent money and the Diva Company's tax evasion, the profits would be returned to the Southerners via the Rowen Trading Guild.. something along those lines. And in order to silence the Northerners, Eve must have mediated the sale and directly handed them the profits.

That was all Lawrence could discern from the atmosphere in town, and he had no will or desire to know the full truth. He had been acquitted for his part in the fiasco: for being Keeman's minion and for almost becoming Eve's as well. Furthermore, the following day's lunch was a huge spread of tasty food, with no worries about the bill.

“So what is our next destination?”

Holo managed to squeeze out her question between bites of meat so tender she needed no knife nor fangs. It was such exquisite food that Cole had trouble bringing himself to swallow it.

“Who knows.. mmm.. this is delicious.. I wonder what it is?”

He had become so engrossed in the first-rate meal that his off-handed reply won him an icy stare that could have pierced him.

“Eve should be sending someone to inform us about what they managed to extract from Reynolds about the wolf-god's bones. That much is certain, so don't worry.”

“Hmph. That was but a verbal contract.”

She tore into a deep-fried fish-head upon saying so. True to a coastal port town, a bowl of salt was present, and the salt-sprinkled fish-head must have been tasty indeed.. Holo bit into it once, twice, and finally wolfed it down.

“You *do* know how important verbal contracts are, don't you?”

Holo didn't reply, instead licking her fingers like a cat.

“Anyway, I suspect we'll probably end up crossing the channel.”

“You mean the sea?”

Cole lifted his face as he spoke, distracted from his intense debate on whether to eat his lobster's head or leave it alone.

“Since that island nation is importing foreign currency, it must be full of people who are the best at buying this and that kind of item.”

Cole didn't seem to grasp the meaning of his words, and by the time his eyes shifted back to his lobster's head, Holo had snatched it and popped it into her mouth. The sounds of crunching shell followed, as Cole looked on in surprise.. not from the fact that she had taken the head from him, but at the fact that she was actually eating it.

“Lobster heads are edible, you know. In fact they're quite good.”

“Eh?”

If Cole responded with a look of envy, Holo would have been pleased. But it seemed that even the Wisewolf was weak against sad expressions.

“Grr..”

Seeing no other choice, she withdrew the hand that had been reaching for the rest of his lobster.

“Be nice, you two, and eat politely.”

It was an obvious joke, but Holo still flung a large piece of herb at his face. As he sighed and peeled it off his cheek, a conservative knock was heard on the door.

“Probably Eve's messenger..”

Lawrence opened the door a crack.. one who opens their door widely while eating was either a show-off or just being shameless. When he saw who came to visit in that crack, he was glad he hadn't thrown it widely open.

“Oh, I shan't have minded coming in.”

Eve's mischievous words rang out as Lawrence walked into the corridor and shut the door behind him. Holo would still hear every single word, but it was better than inciting a fight.

“You've got to be joking. But.. to think that you yourself would come calling.”

“You say that so coldly.. how surprising. I'm not one to forget a favor, let alone saving my life.”

In spite of his attitude, if he was asked whether he was happy she came to him personally, he

would have to say yes.

“Oh, about your inquiry..”

“How did that turn out?”

“As expected.. Reynolds had, to some extent, acquired some insight as to the whereabouts of the bones.”

Her choice of words was puzzling.

“To some extent?”

“He concluded it was futile before even I did.”

She tilted her head to show just how sarcastic she was being. She was keeping the truth from him, hidden deep in her heart, on purpose.

“Don't be upset. I hadn't anticipated that outcome.”

“And?”

“Hehe.. I don't recall you wearing such a serious expression yesterday.”

She chuckled and flicked his chin, making him shrink back and wince. Perhaps she had been drinking a little to ease her mood.

“To cut to the case, it's in the Winfield Kingdom, my home country, at the Great Brondel Monastery. Have you heard of it?”

“Bron.. that place with the Golden Sheep?”

“Oh, so you've heard that legend. On the mainland, it's usually only the elderly that know it. But indeed.. it is that same monastery in the legend of the Golden Sheep.”

It is a monastery on a plain that stretches as far as the eye can see, tending to such large numbers of sheep that it's joked that even God cannot count them all. The legend is that once every few centuries, somewhere in the countless flocks, there appears a sheep with golden fleece. This great monastery befitting the Winfield Kingdom was reputed to be as important as any major trading town.

“I've heard that the abbot of the monastery bought it. Of course, I can't be certain whether that's true.”

“No, thank you. I'll repay the fav-”

Lawrence cut himself off when he noticed that Eve was smiling.

“Don't be that way. I'm truly indebted to you. Arold and the furs have finally arrived as well as a ship heading to the south. So..”

She slowly extended her hand, while looking him straight in the eye and smiling slightly.

“..sorry.”

He smiled back and looked down at her hand to clasp it.. and that's when it happened.

“!!”

Whether he had anticipated such a thing happening was beyond him right now - he was so stunned that his mind went entirely blank.

“That smell.. it's that herb 'Abi', isn't it? Keeman must have really gone all out on your meal.”

Eve then laughed and acted as if nothing just happened, replacing the scarf around her face.

“You once told me that business is most profitable when you take your partner by surprise. That's the payment.”

She put her hand on Lawrence's shoulder, who was still at a loss, then moved her head closer.

“If you go to Winfield, my name should be of use. Fleur von Eiterzentel Boland.. or at least, that's my official title, but those who are close to me know my full name: Fleur von Eiterzentel *Marief* Boland. I like the ring that Marief has to it.”

Her innocent laugh would have been quite something to behold if she wasn't wearing her hood.

“I hope it proves to be of use to you. Lawrence..”

Her sudden use of his name was followed by a slight pause, during which he replied with conviction.

“Yes.”

“Kraft Lawrence.. I'm glad I met you.”

They were words fit for people who had served together long in the military. She wore a hood wrapped tightly around her face, clothed from head to toe for a long journey. Her back straight, she removed her hand from his shoulder and extended it quietly. It was an almost annoyingly fresh appearance. His hand gripped hers firmly.

“I won’t forget the name Eve Boland.”

“Heh.. where there's money, there's me. Well, to our next meeting.”

She quickly withdrew her hand and spun around on her heels, walking away with no signs of regret. Business was an endless road of meetings and partings. Lawrence likewise turned and opened the door behind him, but stopped..

“Oh.. what happened?”

The door was open with Cole standing there, for some reason holding a plate full of food and wearing a slight look of fear.

“She told me to go outside..”

Because of the door's angle, Lawrence couldn't see Holo.. but he could tell what was going on from the look on the boy's face and what he said. He stroked Cole's head.

“Will you endure the hallway for a bit?”

Lawrence couldn't tell if he was wearing the correct smile, but he had to smile.. it was the only way he could survive what was coming. But as Cole nodded and walked past Lawrence into the corridor, Lawrence plucked something off his plate.

It was the same herb, Abi, which Eve had smelled.

The same herb that had been thrown at his face.

He eyed the sprig in his hands before tossing it into his mouth. He chewed it as he entered the room, closing the door behind him.

I don't want to remember anything after this.

If Lawrence was transcribing a legend, that was how he wanted to end it. He let his mind drift in an attempt to escape reality.

