



*Drunken Wolf  
Translations*

# *Volume 10*

狼と香辛料

*Spice and Wolf*

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Merchant  
meats  
spicy wolf.

支倉凍砂  
Isuna Hasekura

狼と香辛料  
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# 狼 と 香 辛 料



支倉凍砂

Jisuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉 十

Jyuu Ayakura





*"The banner of moon and shield shall always sway in the wind,  
so we don't mind the little things."*

Merchant belonging to the Ruvik Alliance, Lago Pisky.

Traveling student, Toad Cole.



The shepherd Huskins.

*“One of them kept staring in our direction just now.”*

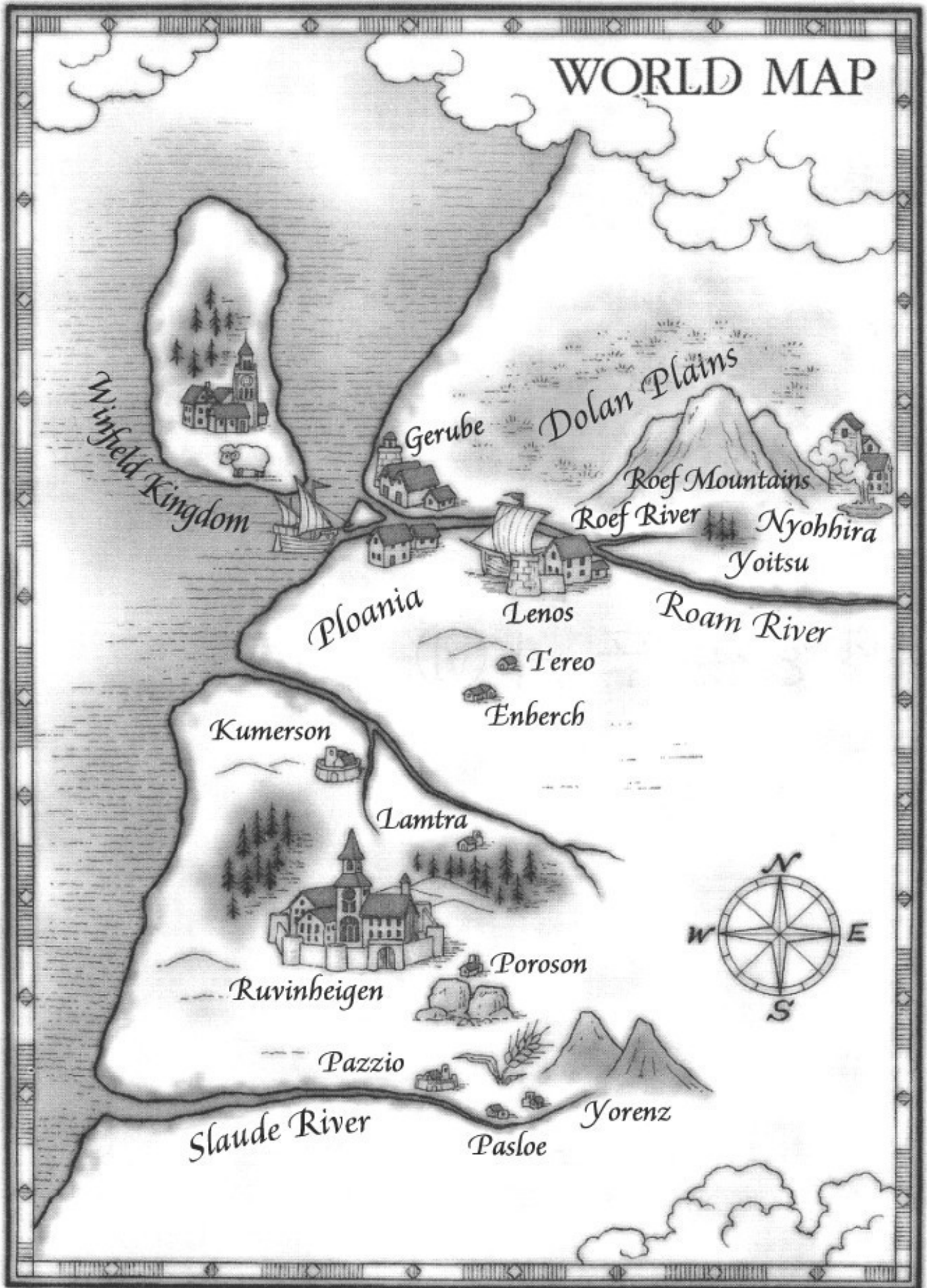
*“So I wasn't just imagining it.”*





*"I'm sorry.. please be patient for a bit longer, okay?"*

*"..Aye."*



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料⑩

# *Spice and Wolf*

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**Volume 10**

*Translation & Editing by  
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

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# Prologue

Candles are luxury items. They can only illuminate the space one can encircle with two arms, and on top of that they burn out far too quickly.

For these reasons, they're mostly only used for activities that can't be done in daylight. For instance, carefully shaving away the edges of gold coins with a small knife, sewing a hidden compartment into the bottom of a gunnysack, or sprinkling highly-taxed salt into that compartment.

When business was good, one might even be taken with sketching the shop of their dreams or ideal town onto paper that was just as expensive as candles. Yet, be they illicit acts or paper sketches, such nocturnal activities were secretly for one's happiness.

The Church would often warn that smiling secretly at night was a surefire way to attract the company of demons; such warnings were surely born from observations of merchants sitting at their desks at night, secretly delighting in Lord knows what. When he was but an apprentice, inadvertently spotting his master all hunched over his desk would send him shivering back under his covers.

And yet, since a time he couldn't pinpoint, he'd taken on the habit of lighting a candle even when he had nothing of particular importance to attend to. He simply sat there in the candlelight and stared at the slowly-melting candlestick or his cup, which was filled to the brim with wine he had no intention of drinking.

He actually knew well why he kept a candle lit. In the past the night had always been a hindrance to business and a nuisance to him, but now he wanted to savor the evening hours.. even if it was only for a little longer. He wished to indulge in this hasteless time of peace and quiet preceding the hustle and bustle of a new day.

As if preordained, the sound of two individuals breathing in unison reached his ears. If only he could listen to those relaxed breaths he wouldn't mind lighting another candle, but the night was fading fast and soon another hectic day would arrive. If he didn't go to sleep soon, his body wouldn't be able to handle it.

He laughed silently and prepared to blow out the candle, but couldn't help hesitating for a moment to glance at the source of the breathing. It was a sight that could conquer any fear one might have of the dark. That very image lingered in his mind right up until he finally drifted off into the land of dreams.

序

幕



# Chapter 1

A boat became a very unreliable mode of transportation the moment it left the harbor. Seasoned boatman didn't even really consider a certain level of turbulence to be “turbulence” at all, even if the others on the boat felt as if their world had become a spinning disaster zone. Why would he feel that way? Because the others beside him also felt the same way.

It was he and those two companions of his who had embarked on this journey. They had been fooling around merrily on the boat's deck before it had left the harbor. Once it began rocking however, one of them had immediately gone below into the cargo deck and clung tightly to him, refusing to let go ever since.

Said companion had a slender build, so seeing his trembling body all scrunched up made him look much like a tiny kitten. For his own part he didn't mock the boy, but allowed him to lean up against his knees, trembling.

Since becoming an independent traveling merchant at the age of eighteen, he'd traveled far and wide for seven years. He'd taken in all manner of experiences, large and small. But during his first boat ride, he'd also cried out for dear life at the slightest rock of the boat. He had no right to mock his companion now.

Lawrence patted his companion's shivering back gently and rhythmically as he pondered over things. After surveying the dark, musty interior of the cargo deck, his thoughts shifted and he couldn't suppress a wry smile. It made him feel a bit guilty, but he couldn't help but wish that it was his other companion who was being docile right now.

If only Cole was the one who was bouncing around delightedly right now. He couldn't help but feel this way since Cole - a traveling student often mistaken for a girl - was always such a clever and obedient lad. A soft sigh escaped his lips when he sighted another figure descending into the cargo deck, swiftly and lightly.

“You, I have seen the ocean!”

With that, his other traveling companion Holo sat down next to them with a thump, her eyes sparkling with life. At first glance she appeared to be a nun, with a hood draped over her head and a robe reaching down to her ankles. But anyone watching her sitting cross-legged now after fooling around to her heart's content would have understood that she only wore those for the sake of travel.

Indeed she *did* only dress that way for travel convenience; it simply made it easier to get things done in a good many situations when one seemed to be a nun. And such, Lawrence had no desire to criticize her for her crass and unrefined manner. Still, as one of his hands caressed

Cole's back, the other pressed down on her robe.

“Hmm?”

She turned around with an expression that seemed to ask, “what is it?”

“That tail you’re so proud of.”

As soon as she heard those words her mouth spread into a wide grin, and then her tail slid back under her robe. Indeed, her hooded robe served another vital purpose beyond making her appear to be a traveling nun: it concealed the tail that grew from her waist, and the lively pair of ears that grew atop the head of this teenage-looking girl. Her grin also revealed a pair of sharp fangs.

Indeed, her maiden-like appearance wasn't her true form. In reality she was a wolf deity, several centuries old, who dwelled within stalks of wheat.

“You, it really is the ocean!”

“Alright, alright. Could you please settle down? You're like a puppy who's seen snow for the first time.”

“Uhm.. how could one remain calm with a such a vast ocean before her very eyes? Even the fields I have seen are narrow by comparison. That common phrase, 'wide ocean' – there truly could not be a more fitting description.”

Lawrence could picture her clinging tightly to the edge of the boat while staring out at the sea, judging from the moisture on the brow peeking out from under her hood. Even her robe was damp with seawater, making Lawrence feel a desire to back away from her as they sat together.

“Haven't you seen the ocean before?”

“Yes. I have sprinted to my heart's content along sandy beaches before, and many times I could not resist the urge to leap into the sea, so strong was my desire to run upon its surface. As soon as I saw that boundless blue again I thought about how joyous it would be to sprint over it and leave my woes behind. I have heard people muse that they would like to soar through the sky as a bird, so how can it be that they do not feel the same desire to run along the ocean?”

Holo often proudly proclaimed herself to be the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, and indeed Lawrence had borne witness to her brilliance on many an occasion. And yet, to his eyes right now she seemed like little more than a puppy. He responded, somewhat annoyed.

“..We often wonder what lands or nations lie at the other end of the ocean, but don't imagine

ridiculous things like running over it.”

“You sure are an uninteresting male.”

Every now and then Holo showed some animal tendencies, but she'd never been as puppy-like as she was now. Lawrence couldn't help but worry about what this meant for the future, because the boat was carrying them toward the snowy Winfield Kingdom.

A cat would curl in front of a fire when it snowed, but a puppy would bound with reckless abandon in the snow. Maybe it would have been a good idea to invest in a collar and leash before they'd left. As the thought entered his mind, she blew a mighty sneeze.

“Hey, hurry up and get under a blanket. Take care that you don't get ill running outside and getting wet in this cold weather.”

“Aye. This ocean breeze that carries moisture is a big pain. Even my sense of smell is dulled by the rank scent of the tides.”

After tossing a blanket over her robe Holo began sniffing at it, as if to revive her sense of smell by smelling something familiar.

“Oh, yes, you..”

“Hmm?”

“I could just barely make out land ahead of our boat. Is that our destination?”

“No, that's another island. From here our boat'll bear north, and we should arrive at our destination in the evening.”

The Winfield Kingdom was a large island with a number of smaller ones in the surrounding region. Based on what Lawrence had heard, the strait that separated it from the mainland was narrow enough that one could see the shores of those islands from the mainland, albeit barely.

There was even a legend of an ancient war that raged between the shores, with a war god reincarnated as a warrior throwing spears across the strait to attack the opposite shore. Of course such legends were hardly credible, but they did serve to show how close the two shores were.

“Aye. Regardless of our destination, all will be well as long as the direction of the wind does not change.”

“Hmm? The direction of the wind?”

“Against a headwind, the boat would be unable to move forward. Right now a proper tailwind is

hitting the sails, so there should be nothing to worry about.”

For a moment Lawrence wasn't sure how to react, but he was sure that if he showed off his knowledge pretentiously she'd be sure to repay him later with dividends. As such he began his reply with a smile that was neither humble nor arrogant.

“Indeed, but even against a headwind the boat would still be able to move forward, just more slowly.”

“..”

Holo was partially concealed under her hood and the fluffy blanket like a fox that had retreated into its lair, and she now eyed him with a face full of suspicion. Her ears flitted about rapidly, making it obvious that she doubted the truth behind his statement.

“It's hard to believe without actually seeing it yourself, isn't it? But even against a headwind, a boat can zigzag left and right, diagonally into the wind. I hear the Church even harassed the first sailor who came up with the idea, claiming he was 'using the power of the devil.’”

“..”

Despite continuing to eye him suspiciously for some time, Holo eventually seemed to more or less accept his explanation. She sneezed softly and murmured.

“Why will it not change direction sooner?”

“But you know, I never suspected we'd end up actually crossing the ocean,”

He spoke under his breath after seeing her reaction, smiling softly and peering up at the deck above them.

Each time the boat rocked with the undulating waves it would creak in a way that would wrack the nerves of one unaccustomed to the sound, but that same sound became more like a soothing lullaby once one grew used to it. Still, on this boat ride Lawrence felt apprehensive that the boat could fall apart at any moment.

“That beloved horse of yours is probably casually grazing on grass right now.”

“It's not like I left him there so he could rest, but it's not like there's much work for him to do right now, either. What a good life he has.”

“Oh? At whom might your sarcasm be directed, may I ask?”

Put briefly, the surface reason that Lawrence and his companions had embarked on this journey was because Holo had wished it. Yet, both he and Holo were well aware that it was only an

excuse they came up with to save face. He knew she was being antagonistic just for the sake of argument.

“Well, he's not the only one that's off work; so am I.. though I've gotta admit that spending my days so carefree is nice too, once in a while.”

A few days ago Lawrence had been caught in a commotion that threatened to tear the town of Gerube in two – the same town their boat had departed from. That commotion was caused when a legendary creature, a Narwhale, was caught by fishermen. A number of savvy merchants proceeded to wage a trade war to win the valuable creature.

He had initially traveled to Gerube to investigate a certain matter related to the forepaw bones of a wolf deity similar to Holo. Little did he know that he would get swept up into events that placed him directly at the center of the commotion.

He'd always considered himself a filthy, money-grubbing merchant, but it wasn't until that incident that he learned the truth behind the saying, “Beyond the mountains lie other mountains.” In Gerube he met people like Keeman, who was already a branch office manager at his young age, and Eve, who single-handedly turned the tides in the city and yet sought to keep all of the profits for herself.

Ultimately, Lawrence and company had finally grasped the key to resolving the conflict in a satisfactory manner and were rewarded with information about the wolf deity's bones. Hence why they were on this boat.

He now held in his bosom a letter of recommendation from Keeman and Eve which should serve to make their search all the easier. During his first visit to the Winfield Kingdom, this letter was more reassuring than any weapon. And yet, Holo bore a revulsion for the letter's scent like some animal unable to stand the smell of metal.

“But still, given how that scenario played out, did you not receive a small reward? Surely that counts as profit, does it not?”

“So *that's* why those silver coins went missing from my wallet.. it was your doing after all, wasn't it?”

“Had I not given you a push back then, could you have born the torment of that situation with your miserable lack of confidence? Put in those terms, a few coins should seem worthy payment.”

She spoke in a perfectly composed tone while sliding back under the blanket. This wolf would only take action up to the point where a human would become truly enraged. The contents of a merchant's wallet were something as important to him as his life, and yet Lawrence couldn't bring himself to get angry.. he could only sigh helplessly.

“You took enough for yourself *and* this fella, right?”

When he pointed at Cole, Holo let out a “hmpf” and closed her eyes. Cole's insights had been the key to resolving the conflict in Gerube. However, given his personality he certainly wouldn't have asked for a reward and would probably have declined one even if Lawrence had offered.

As such, Holo would have forced him to accept his deserved reward.. even if it meant stealing. Lawrence suspected that while he was out, she'd taken the money from his wallet right in front of Cole, thus making him an accomplice. He gently patted Holo's slouched back, and soon heard her tail swishing about.

“But this 'Great Brondel Monastery' sure sounds like a troublesome place.”

“Could it be that it is crawling with stubborn old men?”

Holo suddenly peered out from under the blanket as she asked her question.

“The Great Brondel Monastery is a magnificent sight, which must be seen to believe in its might. At its grandeur pagan gods do cower, and its majesty is a pillar granting the people its power. And so the Great Brondel Monastery is awed, being the dwelling place of our almighty God.”

Holo wrinkled her nose as Lawrence's emotionally-infused recital of those famous lines of poetry. For a pagan deity like herself, the Great Brondel Monastery was sure to be an unbearably boring place.

“Although setting aside its historical significance, being a place where so many saints were born, the Great Brondel Monastery of today is probably a more suitable place for us merchants to visit.”

“Hmm?”

“Because it's sacred, it regularly receives large donations of land or money. So even if its unwilling, it has to devise ways to manage its property out of necessity. And besides, being 'the dwelling place of God' naturally means its property has to look impressive, so it's practically a trading company in its own right these days. They couldn't let it be run by some arrogant monk, or it'd become a really unpleasant place.”

Legend had it that during a conflict of interest between the Pope and a worldly king, the Pope had the king thrown out into the snowy wilderness for three days. Had he been a merchant instead of a king, he might not have been let off so easily.

Merchants often shared tales about how the Church intentionally threw difficult obstacles in

the way to ensure that a sales negotiation went smoothly in their favor. Lately, however, the Great Brondel Monastery had been suffering from a recession. In times like these, only peasants were humble. Those in the upper echelons of society would likely only become more conservative.

“Are the bones truly in that unpleasant place?”

Since the wolf deity's bones were a sensitive topic, even Holo made it a point to lower her voice. Lawrence could only respond with a vague nod, because even if Eve had provided the info she hadn't expressed full confidence in her information.

“After all, though the likelihood isn't too low, the truth is still hidden behind the great stone walls surrounding the monastery. There's even a saying that the gods themselves don't know what goes on behind those walls.”

“I once heard a missionary say that no truth, be it great or small, can remain hidden.”

“Even your own feelings are betrayed by those ears and tail of yours.”

“While on the other hand, your face betrays your feelings on a constant basis.”

With that, Holo let out a casual yawn and Lawrence followed suit. Setting aside their earlier days, such verbal exchanges had become as normal to them as a “hello.” Presently, Lawrence was comparatively more concerned about his conversations with Cole.

Gently peeling away the blanket to check on the boy, Lawrence found he'd already drifted off and was soundly asleep. As long as he slept like that, he didn't have to fear the rocking of the boat or worry about getting seasick.

As he pulled the blanket gently back over Cole, Lawrence glimpsed Holo tucking her extended head back in as she slowly withdrew back under the blanket - she was also worried about the boy.

“Remember to rouse me once we have arrived.”

Lawrence rubbed Holo's hunched back softly in response to those muffled words coming out of the blanket. As he did, the blanket rose up slightly before settling back down softly. Perceiving it to have been caused by Holo sighing in satisfaction, he chuckled softly and continued stroking her back.

~~~

The boat continued on its smooth voyage and finally arrived as planned at the Winfield Kingdom's port town of Yiku. When they departed the sky had been a bluish gray, but as they

walked off the boat and onto the docks it was now painted in a dark red. Cole, who had slept right up until the last minute, squinted as if his eyes weren't yet used to the brightness.

Seeing a harbor in the wintertime would sometimes call to mind a summer sunset. Perhaps such a connection was made because a harbor was usually so busy during the day, yet was now dead quiet. The atmosphere a harbor gave off in the winter felt both lazy and forlorn, and yet this particular harbor seemed quieter still; perhaps it was due to the extreme cold.

When winter fell, much of the Winfield Kingdom would be covered in a thick layer of snow - it was a northern country in the truest sense. As the sun continued its gradual descent in the west, the harbor air became eerily cold.

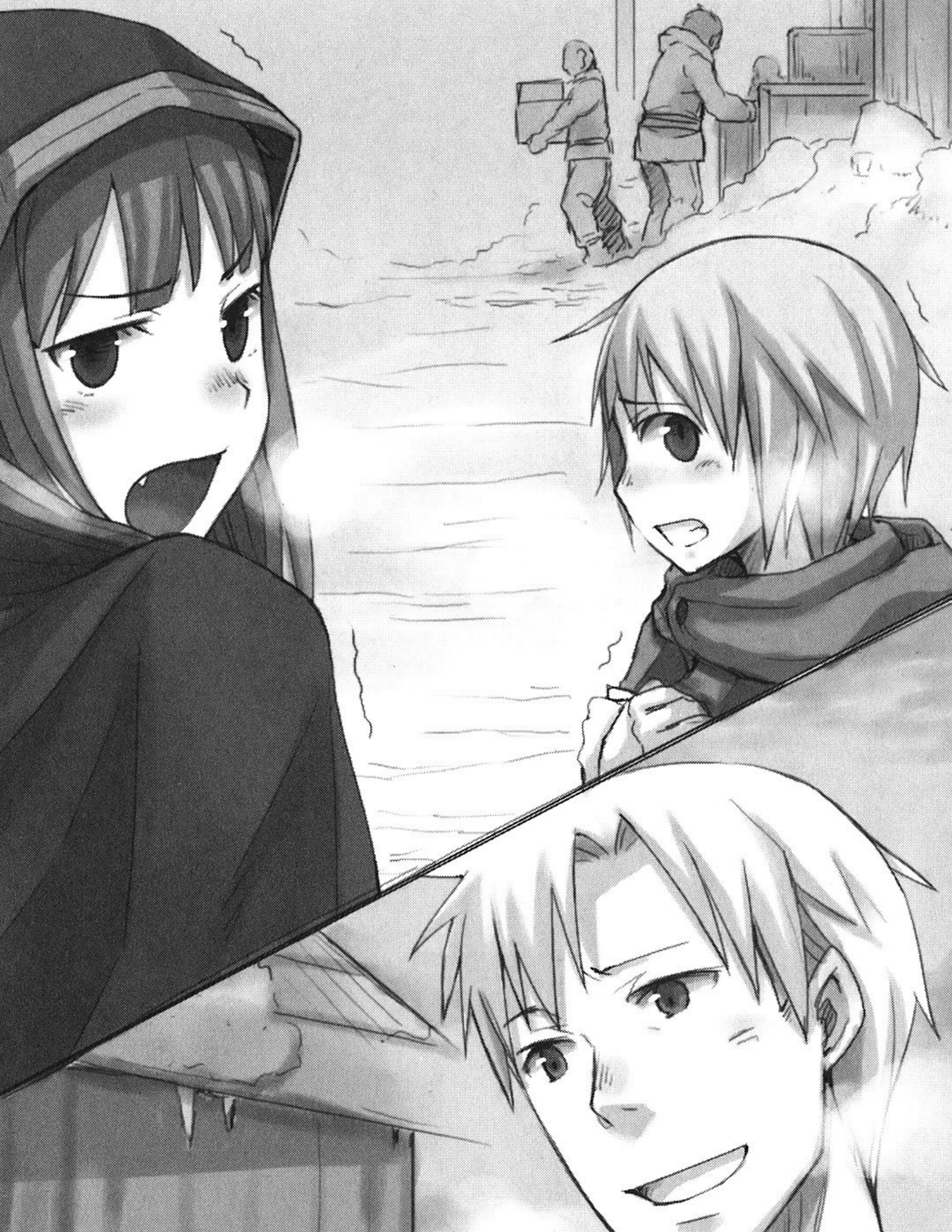
A closer look revealed thick piles of snow lining the edges of paths and buildings. Having but a pair of worn-out straw sandals to cover his soles, Cole continued to trudge along as though he couldn't stop for even a single moment.

“You, if we do not find a spot to rest soon we shall all freeze to death here.”

Holo wasn't much better off than Cole. She'd been leisurely sleeping under a blanket during the boat ride, making the cold all the less bearable having now emerged from under it.

“Didn't it snow all the time in your homeland? Just bear with it for a little while.”

“Foolish mule. Do you mean I ought to cover my body in fur right now?”



She held Cole from behind as she spoke. Lawrence tilted his head in response, then he opened Keeman and Eve's letter of recommendation and set his gaze on that.

“Please head to the Tyler Company and ask for Mr. Deutschmann,’ huh?”

The letter's author had even been considerate enough to sketch the Tyler Company's logo. Lawrence strode on, his letter in hand. The harbor was full of well-known companies, including some very big names.

In spite of the Winfield Kingdom being covered in snow in the winter, its climate was quite mild at other times with a healthy amount of rain. Fertile grasslands stretched out as far as the eye could see. Be it horse or cattle, all livestock bred here quickly grew to a healthy size and build.

Sheep breeding, in particular, thrived as a business. Sheep's wool was even reputed to grow quicker than wild grass in the Winfield Kingdom. The amount of wool the kingdom exported was second to none.

Mountainous piles of woolen bags could be seen on the loading docks of companies along the harbor, and under each company's roof was a sign emblematic of a sheep's horn – the mark of a wool dealer approved by the monarchy.

The Tyler Company was at the end of this row of companies, and maintained a storefront of the highest standards. Seeing candlelight seeping out from under the door of a company was a sign of success.

Lawrence gave their wooden door a few knocks, and it immediately opened. However, perhaps due to it being after business hours, the door only opened a crack. Regardless of the town or harbor, one should always strictly adhere to the business hours of a company or workshop.

“Who is it?”

“My humblest apologies for disturbing you at this late hour. I'm looking for your company's Mr. Deutschmann.”

“Deutschmann? Who exactly are-”

“I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trading Guild. I've been sent by Mr. Lud Keeman of Gerube.”

Lawrence passed forth the letter as he spoke. The bearded middle-aged merchant stared at his face for some time before he accepted the letter and examined both sides. Then, with a “please wait a moment,” he walked deeper into the building.

In that instant, warm air from inside the building seeped outside through the crack in the door.

In addition, and perhaps because they happened to arrive at the end of the work-day, a delicious aroma also wafted outside - something like sheep's or cow's milk boiled with honey.

Even Lawrence was greatly tempted by the odor, so Holo's super-acute sense of smell must have made it infinitely harder for her. Holo's stomach grumbled impatiently, and just then the same merchant returned and opened the door.. Lawrence wondered if he'd heard her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Please come inside, Mr. Lawrence.”

“Please forgive our intrusion.”

He entered the building after acknowledging the man with a slight nod of his head, and was followed by Holo and Cole.

“Please come this way.”

The merchant closed the door behind them and walked on ahead. As they entered they found themselves in what seemed to be a room for holding negotiations, with several tables and desks set up for that very purpose.

All of the furniture in that room was adorned with fancy-looking ornaments. Banners emblazoned with portraits of the ruler of Winfield Kingdom hung from the walls. It seemed more like an aristocrat's manor than a company.

A few merchants could be spied playing cards on the neatly-arranged negotiating tables. Though the people of Winfield loved to gamble, their behavior didn't seem crude at all – it was quite graceful, actually.

Rather than loud clamor with beer mugs in hand, the people here seemed to prefer warm drinks while indulging in classier leisures. It was precisely this characteristic that heightened the sense of aristocracy that existed here.

“Was the sea unruly?”

The merchant asked his question as Lawrence looked on, while they ascended a flight of stairs to the second floor.

“No, it wasn't. Perhaps owing to the blessing of the gods, the sea was quite peaceful.”

“That's good to hear. I heard that huge waves were not too long ago raging off the coast of one of the northern districts. Normally the ocean currents here flow south to north, but the situation was so bad that the currents even reversed.”

When tides were great along a coast, one could catch all sorts of fish there. Surely it would have been such large tides that made it possible for the port town of Gerube to catch the Narwhale.

“The seas in our area are seldom so restless, but once huge waves are stirred up there's no end to them. The sea's surface is usually as tranquil as a lake's, carrying the fallen snow on it.”

“I see. Maybe that's why the people here are so peaceful and gentle.”

“Hahaha! We're just a gloomy bunch who love shifting like the winds.”

Anyone in the trading business would often meet fellow merchants from other countries in inns and lodges. Their personalities differed, of course, but depending on their home country one could often see the influences the environment they were raised in had on them.

Most people hailing from the Winfield Kingdom were peaceful and gentle in nature. Though, as this merchant leading them now had cleverly put it, one could just as easily describe them as gloomy and quick to shift.

If Holo was left to live here for a few years, would she also grow gentle and obedient like a lamb? Though the thought crossed his mind, Lawrence figured that her becoming gloomier would only worsen her personality, not change her for the better. He turned and looked back at her, and she tilted her head in confusion.

“Here we are.”

The merchant knocked on a door as he spoke, though he opened it before the answer even came.

“Come in.”

Lawrence couldn't suppress his astonishment as they entered, and it crept its way onto his face. Holo's eyes widened as well. Cole didn't even make an effort to suppress the small gasp that escaped his lips.

Lining the walls of that room were shelves that reached the ceiling. Each was filled with all kinds of merchandise ranging from balls of yarn or thread to fabrics, spindles and even miniature looms. But what really got one's attention were the sheep skulls on those shelves.

The skull's hollow eyes peered ominously down at their uninvited guests in the candlelight. They numbered perhaps twenty, with jaws of various shapes and horns of various sizes. A creaking noise snapped Lawrence back to reality; the man who had been writing at the desk at the far end of the room had risen to his feet.

Though the lack of a proper greeting was offset by the immediate impression of the room's furnishings, Lawrence would have certainly deducted points from the other party had this been a business negotiation. Still, the room's manner of decoration seemed engineered precisely to

shock visitors. A proud smile appeared on the man's face.

“They're the sheep that bring us wealth, though the Church certainly can't be allowed to see this.”

The middle-aged gentleman had a mustache growing over his lips and possessed a tiny pair of eyes. When he smiled they squinted almost to the point of fading away. Lawrence could feel the thickness of the man's palms as they shook hands.

The man's smiling face indeed gave off a sense of warmth and kindness. Few were capable of concealing the true depth of their experience and skill this well. It deeply relieved Lawrence that he wasn't there to negotiate a business deal with the man. No matter how hard one worked, there was always someone who felt like a tougher opponent.

“I am Ame Deutschmann, the man responsible for wool purchases in our company.”

“Our deepest apologies for visiting you so suddenly. I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trading Guild.”

“Please have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

After the usual pleasantries, Lawrence, Holo and Cole sat down one after the other on the long bench placed in front of the low desk. Deutschmann took his seat across from them. Gesturing politely, the man who led the three of them took his leave.

“Back to the matter at hand, it gave me quite a shock indeed to see the name of Sir Keeman, the one called the 'Eye of Gerube'. And followed by the Boland name no less! Just how frightful a deal am I looking at here?”

Uttering words that brought a wry smile to their listener's face at every opportunity was one of the defining characteristics of a Winfieldian. Rubbing his nose, Lawrence followed the other man's lead and answered as if making an excuse.

“It's always when a war's already underway that a king expresses his gratitude to the peasantry. At such times even a small cup of water from the king would be treasured as much as a gift of furs.”

“Oh.. you mean to say there's been some great commotion in Gerube?”

“I assume you've heard a little about it already? I'd be more than happy to tell you about it right away, but I know not if you'll believe me.”

Surprisingly, those words seemed to spark Deutschmann's interest. His shoulders shook in

laughter and he looked rather pleased as he replied.

“One does often come across miracles when doing business. But back on subject, according to the request in this letter.. you seek to visit the Great Brondel Monastery?”

“Indeed. What I'd like to ask is, besides buying wool, what could I use as a suitable reason to pay them a visit?”

“Oh-?”

Traveling merchants were accustomed to growing out their beards, while town merchants in Winfield seemed to prefer mustaches. Deutschmann now pinched his bushy mustache as watched Lawrence.

“Speaking of the monastery, I seem to recall that pilgrims can only head to a distant branch, and aren't allowed to approach the main building, is that correct?”

“Indeed. Even only a select few among those who belong to the monastery are permitted to enter the main building. As you should already know, even the trade of wool is done at a specially-designated branch, so..”

“Knocking on the main building's doors isn't a trivial task.”

“Precisely, Mr. Lawrence. Of course, that other branch is basically the lifeline of the Great Brondel Monastery, so there's still a connection with the main building. But *this*.. this is something else..”

Of course Lawrence knew exactly what was spellbinding Deutschmann's tiny pair of eyes, obviously those of a veteran merchant. It was the signature of a Boland. They could head to the monastery neither as pilgrims nor as merchants, so their remaining options were quite limited. The name of fallen Winfield nobility was something any merchant with a sizable business would recognize, and Eve's name could only serve one purpose.

“Please rest assured. I'm not a political emissary.”

No one would believe the words of a merchant, especially under these circumstances. It was no wonder that a needle-like glance pierced out from beneath Deutschmann's eyelids. The man who had introduced himself as the wool purchaser for the Tyler Company looked at the letter in his hand, then at Lawrence, and finally at Holo and Cole.

If Lawrence had come alone, Deutschmann may have politely turned him down. But for Lawrence to bring two people with him made it unlikely that he was an emissary. Deutschmann seemed to finally come to that conclusion.

“I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable.”

“Not at all. Please don’t say that. You have good reason to be suspicious.”

“My thanks, but this is precisely the kind of trouble the Great Brondel Monastery is facing right now.”

“Huh?”

At Lawrence's questioning remark, a knock was heard at the door and a maid entered with a tray. The drinks on the tray must be the same kind the men playing cards downstairs were drinking, he thought.

They were apparently considerate enough to at least provide something to warm up these travelers visiting them from the frigid outdoors. Clouds of steam rose up from the heated drinks, almost seeming substantial enough to grasp.

“Please have a drink. This beverage is made from sheep’s milk brewed with honey and ginger. Everyone here, young and old, rich and poor, drinks it during this season, whether they be king or peasant. It’ll warm you right up.”

“Then I’ll help myself.”

Looking at the bubbling sheep’s milk made it felt as if his teeth would melt if he drank it. Though Lawrence didn't dislike sweet things, he didn't enjoy things that were *too* sweet. He considered stopping after taking a small sip to be polite. Holo, who loved such drinks, would probably find a chance to down the rest.

“Let's return to our previous subject.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, Mr. Lawrence, what are your thoughts after seeing the state of the harbor just now?”

A common method to determine one's sincerity was to pass a sudden topic onto them. As such Lawrence didn't stop to contemplate, and just let the words flow directly from his heart.

“Maybe it's the extreme cold combined with the late hour, but the place seemed pretty desolate.”

“Indeed, that's it exactly. Business has been terrible lately. I say this not out of modesty as a merchant, but because it's the truth.”

“..I’m very sorry to hear that. As a traveling merchant from the mainland, I'm honestly not very familiar with the circumstances in your country..”

“I see. Then you're also unaware of the ban issued by King Sylvan?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Even traveling merchants like Lawrence needed a grasp of the laws that governed the lands where they had business dealings. But if anything should happen, a traveling merchant had only to flee into the wilderness to escape the effects of particular laws. A trading company had no such option unless they could unload their merchandise at a place known as a harbor. To them a law was as good as the word of God.

“Simply put, the ban that was issued was an import ban. There are no restrictions at all on exports, but imports are limited to wheat and wine. The purpose of the ban is—”

“To stop the outflow of currency, correct?”

“Correct. The king has already been on the throne for five years. His greatest goal is to make our nation wealthy. However, wool sales have been dropping steadily, and getting worse every year. The Winfield Kingdom doesn't have much else to export besides wool, and if the amount we sell can't keep up with the amount we purchase, of course our nation will grow poor. And so the king, who lacks any practical business experience, came up with this solution.”

Both of Deutschmann's palms were raised up in a gesture that seemed to say, “what a pain.” Based on his displeasure it wasn't difficult to guess how negatively the townspeople viewed the ban.

“As soon as a merchant finds out that nothing can be sold to Winfield, of course he won't go out of his way to come here. The number of ships arriving at the harbor drops sharply, the inns go quiet and empty, no one drinks wine at the taverns, the meat goes unsold, there are no travelers to sell mantles and blankets to, stables verge on bankruptcy just to feed their horses, and moneychangers are left weighing only the dust that collects on their scales.”

“A vicious cycle.”

“Precisely. Seems a king who knows how to swing his sword in battle doesn't know how to use common knowledge. In such circumstances it's no wonder that business would continually grow worse. Before we knew it, the money in town was all gone, and now.. well, see for yourself!”

Deutschmann then retrieved a coin with a practiced gesture. The Winfield clan had established their kingdom after generations of conflict among rival clans on their cluster of islands, and many bloody struggles with the pirates of the northern seas. This coin, with the profile of their third ruler, King Sufon, was severely blackened. One could barely even make out any shapes on its surface in the dim light of the room.

“It's turned out this way because they mixed a bunch of copper or Lord-knows-what in with the silver. I hear that not even the most skilled moneychangers can tell what little silver's left. When a currency loses its credibility, it's no longer useful for business. Apparently, a number of feudal lords even started importing copper coins to stock up so they can buy bread, but it's futile. Confronted with this, the king's just imposing more regulations all the more rigorously..”

Holo and Cole also leaned forward to get a good look at the coin on the table, but straightened their backs when they saw that Deutschmann planned to continue speaking.

“With the situation being as it is, the appearance of opportunists is but a natural consequence.” Business was simply a tug-of-war. One could easily find out what lay at the ends by feeling his way along the rope. In an economic slump run rampant with an inferior currency, the results were a shortage of money to even buy bread.. and what would happen then?

A country's economy wasn't some clandestine ritual that took place behind closed doors. Its currency was sure to draw comparison with other countries to judge their relative worth. If only the coins of the Winfield Kingdom were blackened and inferior, how would their situation look?

Just as the weaker deer was destined to be preyed upon by wolves, fortunes based on weak currencies would fall prey to stronger ones.

“By opportunists, you're referring to those who come to buy money and not merchandise?”

“Exactly, and for the same reason that sharks gather around wounded fish. That's why my first thought was that you were one of them, Mr. Lawrence.”

“I see. The Great Brondel Monastery indeed seems a very likely target. The place possesses not only power and influence, but also money.”

“That's right.”

“Then may I ask who exactly is playing the role of the shark?”

Deutschmann revealed a vulgar grin perfectly suited for a decadent tavern, then answered with his teeth revealed.

“The banner of the moon and shield.”

“!”

“That's right, the Ruvik Alliance, whose base of operations is in the mainland's northern regions. It is they who are playing the role of the shark.”

The Ruvik Alliance had several immense warships, upon which were strung beautiful green

banners bearing their signature moon and shield insignia. It was the most powerful economic alliance in existence, consisting of twenty-three professional guilds from eighteen different regions, backed by thirty aristocrats and led by ten large companies.

Even the notion that they could choose who to place on the throne wasn't farfetched. It truly was an organization of incredible magnitude. Legitimate tactics were rendered all but obsolete as soon as one was targeted by such a powerful organization.

“Of course we don't dare to make a move, and we just end up watching as spectators. Besides, they strictly adhere to the rules so they don't interfere with our wool trade.”

“Are they after the monastery's land?”

“Yes. I hear they're trying to use this chance to purchase the monastery's land, and win over the region's aristocrats. Because of the king's decision to increase taxes, and the decrease in their land's income, these aristocrats are already in a seriously tight spot. The alliance's next step would be to intervene in the kingdom's politics. With their immense size it's pretty much impossible for them to keep their intentions a secret, but that ultimately becomes the force driving their actions.”

A target that caught the eye of the Ruvik Alliance had no chance to turn the tides. The image in Lawrence's mind was of aristocrats anticipating King Sylvan's transformation into a puppet ruler and selling them over to the Ruvik Alliance. When that happened everything would come crashing down like an avalanche.

Lawrence looked over at Holo with the thought that they always seemed to run into something interesting when they arrived in a new region.

“That said, the monastery seems to be more stubborn than we anticipated, so the negotiations aren't going well. Apparently each company in the alliance is competing to be the first to seal the deal. Therefore, hmm..”

Deutschmann let his gaze fall on the letter of recommendation once more, then he again pinched his mustache. He finally spoke with a slight tilt of his head.

“If you think that visiting such a dangerous lair is worth the adventure, Mr. Lawrence, I can introduce you to one of the heads..”

The “gloomy and quick-to-shift” Winfieldian merchant revealed a faint smile.

“The only condition is that you never spoke to our company.”

Lawrence didn't reply immediately, but it wasn't because he felt that he'd change his mind after careful consideration. With such interesting developments, he doubted the merchants in the

area would continue to stand by as spectators. A few would be bound to heed the urge to take action. Anyone would want a seat closer to the action in a spectacle like this.

In order to trade the wool from the sheep they bred, the Great Brondel Monastery had allotted a plot of land specifically for merchants coming to make the purchases. It was likely that a small commotion had been stirred up already in that specially-allotted area. Now was the time to check the heat of the furnace. If it was burning too hot, it wouldn't be too late to think of another plan. Having calculated thusly, Lawrence replied without even looking at Holo.

“Then I’ll be counting on you.”

Deutschmann responded with a smile.

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A gunnysack of wool was placed on the floor with a thump. If someone told him it was merchandise waiting to be shipped to some distant land, Lawrence wouldn't have doubted it for a second. The flattened sack of stitched linen was stuffed full with wool blankets. When compared with hard and heavy traveling blankets that provided little warmth, these were the kind that would leave you sweating. Just like that, blankets for the three of them had been deposited in their room.

“This is.. um. Hey you, is this really alright?”

Holo had just washed her hair to be rid of the saltwater smell that covered her, and was now drying it in front of a wood-filled fireplace in the inn’s most expensive room. Even she couldn't help but ask, seeing those wool blankets.

She frequently demanded that Lawrence generously book them rooms at quality inns, but she could still more or less judge the price. Lawrence and company had never stayed in such a room. One only had to glance at Holo's reaction to confirm how lavish it was.

“This inn hasn't seen any guests for ten days, and this room's been empty for four weeks. I've heard they get few guests this season, so one Lute silver coin was enough to cover this room and the firewood with change to spare. Although..”

Lawrence pointed at the blackened coins on the table.

“You probably can’t buy anything with those.”

“Aye. So you *are* playing the opportunist.”

“Isn’t that taking it too far? Without demand it's only natural for the price to drop.”

“Whatever the case, so long as you did not reserve this room for the sake of your own vain

pride. Hey, young one, grab the other end for me.”

Holo hastily prepared to make the bed, and Cole - the target of her playful teasing - timidly picked up the other end of her blanket. Lawrence watched them with a wry smile as he pondered other matters.

He reflected on what Deutschmann had told him about the Winfield Kingdom’s difficult situation and the Ruvik Alliance's plans to take advantage of it to further their own goals. No matter the age, the weak were destined to be preyed upon by the strong.

Even so, Lawrence reeled in shock from the idea that even the Great Brondel Monastery, whose praises were sung in so many great poems, had been unable to escape this fate. It was true that the Church no longer held the power they once did, but he still got the feeling they were backed by some silent, unspoken force.

That the two of them had fallen into a dangerous situation, where Holo had been taken as a hostage not long after they met, was precisely due to the Church's existence. The thought that he was observing the downfall of a mighty kingdom from up close was both exciting and gloomy.

Of course, Lawrence had no intention of supporting or attacking either side. Humans ate sheep, but also suffered attacks from wolves. As his thoughts came to this point, Holo suddenly peeked over at him and spoke, staring him in the face.

“If only you could see your own expression, getting all restless like that.”

The air in the room was warm, thanks to the sturdy windows and fireplace. Still, the beads of sweat on the now-robeless Holo's body were probably caused by her frolicking with Cole. Cole's back was hunched as he sat next to the bed drinking water, looking rather spent. On the other hand, Holo's wide eyes had a visible glint of vigor in them - perhaps the smell of wool had excited her.

“Aye, my intentions are wicked indeed. Just now I was silently praying that the Church would last forever.”

“What are you saying?”

Looking disinterested, she sat in a chair and grabbed the water jug on the table for a drink. It should have been filled with water, but instead was filled with wine. It was not made of clay, metal or even bronze; the water jugs here were hollowed-out coconuts. Apparently, coconuts were a fruit from a distant country in the south. Based on that, it was easy to imagine how prosperous the country’s trade was.

“Oh yes, back to your previous topic..”

“If this displeases you, I can switch roles and play the happy merchant watching the collapse of a formerly-powerful enemy?”

“..Foolish mule.”

Despite hesitating for a moment, she stomped on his foot - she was recalling the Narwhale fiasco in Gerube. Setting aside the fact that she would prioritize her own interests, she actually had a loyalty streak in her as well. Despite that, she was likely fretting over the image of having to extend a helping hand to formerly-powerful foe now in distress.

While in Gerube, the three of them had extended a helping hand to Eve, the beautiful merchant called the Wolf of the Roam River. Lawrence of course knew that he had to be ready to pay with his life if he ever teased Holo about that fact. Ever since Eve “ambushed” him, he’d been living on pins and needles. He had no desire to relive that experience a second time.

“I’m a bit saddened by it. Despite my mixed feelings for the Church, they *have* saved me on occasion.”

“Hmm.. I can relate. On the other hand, that guy from Tyler Company seemed pretty pleased as he related their situation.”

“Deutschmann probably *was* pleased. Didn’t he say he was in charge of their wool purchasing? It takes a lot of effort just to win a chance to negotiate with the monastery, so he must be extremely happy to see them at a disadvantage.”

“A gloomy and quick-to-shift personality, was it?”

“That’s right. But haven’t *you* been a bit too happy yourself, since the wool blankets were left here?”

Holo’s face went deadly serious as she heard this. Her ears shot up straight and her cheeks puffed out. Then, perhaps realizing it was too late to cover her emotions, her face relaxed and she sighed.

“Those blankets will only make it difficult for me to sleep. The scent of sheep keeps my mind alert.”

“The scent of money will probably keep those other guys up, too. This time we probably won’t get a chance to partake in the commotion with the monastery. Even with your wisdom, Cole’s cleverness, and my daring, our opponent is simply too much this time.”

“What are you talking about?”

She rested a cheek in her hand as she sat, looking simultaneously tired of Lawrence and yet

quite happy.

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

Cole had suddenly taken the chance to cut in as he tossed more wood on the fire that he'd been watching. Like a proper northerner, he knew how to properly tend to a fire.

“I don't think the Ruvik Alliance is after the wolf deity's bones. If that were true then Eve or Keeman would have at least heard something about it.”

“Then two predators after separate prey just happened to meet on a narrow path?”

“I don't know if ‘happened to meet on a narrow path’ is appropriate.. but whatever the case may be, the Ruvik Alliance is an immensely powerful opponent that may as well be considered the equal of a kingdom. There's no way we could compete with them. However, looking at things from a different perspective, this could be a good chance for us.”

“Hmm?”

Cole shook his coat in front of the fire as he listened to them talk; he was probably trying to coax out any bugs inside of it.

“Right now, the monastery's staring down the jaws of that venomous snake of an alliance. Their possessions are laid out for all the world to see, which spares us the effort of having to discover them. Moreover, Deutschmann said the alliance's goal is to get the monastery's huge tracts of land. Even if the monastery has the bones, the alliance is unlikely to be particularly interested in them right now.”

The Ruvik Alliance certainly wouldn't care about a possession worth only a couple thousand gold coins. In spite of their high value, the wolf deity's bones were just another piece of salable merchandise that one could buy with enough money. What was truly valuable was that which couldn't even be bought with money.

“There shouldn't be any danger in just approaching the monastery for a look. If I had to name a real risk, it'd be..”

“What?”

He tilted his head and replied to Holo.

“..the over-one-hundred-thousand sheep at the Great Brondel Monastery. Do you think you can handle that?”

Lawrence had originally meant to merely joke about it, but after seeing her excitement over a few wool-stuffed blankets he began to seriously worry how she'd once when they arrived at the

monastery.

This was the time when merchants would head there to purchase wool for the coming spring, so one would see a considerable number of sheep gathered just for the quality-evaluation meetings. Even during normal times there would be a lot of sheep-related items at the monastery. And worst of all, the shepherds Holo so despised would be there in numbers no less substantial than the sheep.

Based on her excitement on the boat, Lawrence could only imagine how out of control she would get if there was a show-filled plain there as well. His thoughts slowly began to shift from concern to apprehension.

“Aye, there should not be a problem.”

In spite of his anxiety, she spoke in a tone that indicated it wouldn't be a big deal. His eyes watched that upbeat wolf, as if posing the question “Where do you get all that confidence?” The cunning Wisewolf replied with a smug grin.

“All will be well once I eat enough mutton that even the scent of sheep fails to entice me, will it not? No matter one's love for something there will always come a point when they tire of it.. am I wrong?”

“..”

“Well, if it has been decided then hurry up and get to it! Eating to the point where I am no longer able to sit up requires long and involved preparations! Besides, look! Even this little boy's face has written plain upon it the desire to eat mutton.”

Naturally, Lawrence was aware that she was reaching for an excuse with Cole. But it was true - with Cole's expectant expression, it was even more difficult for Lawrence to ignore her remark. He didn't really want to refute her, but he still felt like messing around for a little bit.

“I'm starting to get tired of spending my money to treat you to these sumptuous feasts all the time. What are your thoughts on that?”

The sea air on the boat ride had left her robe in a sorry state, but Holo slipped back into it without a second thought. She replied as she pulled the hood over her head.

“It would not be so bad to be disliked by another once in a while, but if you were to grow tired of me, that would be too great a burden for my heart to bear.”

She spoke coquettishly, with both hands pressed against her chest. Since responding to that too earnestly would only serve to make him appear foolish, he responded casually.

“Indeed it would, milady.”

Giggling uncontrollably, she then took Cole’s hand and walked toward the door. Once there she spun around, and shouted out like a carefree child.

“Hey! Hurry up!”

What was one to do with her? Lawrence sighed inwardly, then grabbed his coat and rose to his feet.

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The most powerful weapon was a powerful currency. So said a great merchant who had crossed oceans and conquered many lands with golden coins. Having experienced this truth for himself, Lawrence was glad to be a merchant.

He had turned down Deutschmann's offer for them to lodge at Tyler Company. Judging by his words, Deutschmann had extended that offer because locals tended to view travelers from abroad as money-trees to be shaken for their coins. That guess was confirmed the moment they arrived at their inn.

Of course Lawrence heeded Deutschmann’s warning to not exchange his money for Winfield's currency. To test the waters he pulled out a Lute silver coin, which was worth slightly less than a Trenni silver, and saw the innkeeper smile brightly in return. Their plates were piled high with carefully roasted mutton covered in yellow grease, almost to the point that it spilled off onto the table.

This season's lack of grass made shepherding expensive. It was said that many shepherds slaughtered more sheep than usual in order to hoard food. As a result, the price for salt and vinegar to preserve mutton would soar. But here in the Winfield Kingdom, the frigid temperatures were ideal for storing raw meat in slabs of ice, so the price of mutton was naturally lower.

When they took a large bite of mutton and chased it down with wine, a layer of oil formed on that wine. Being able to feast on such quality mutton at such low prices wasn't the kind of fortune one could expect everyday. The only blemish in their otherwise excellent experience was the poor quality of the bread.

Bread was said to reflect the quality of the country it was made in. Wheat, oats and other ingredients for bread were very easy to preserve compared to meat or vegetables, so in periods of unrest the high quality wheat and oats would be restricted to stock up in case a calamity struck.

“I’m so moved! To think that after such a long period without customers, someone with such a

mighty appetite would visit us! This must be the will of the heavens!”

The taverner was exaggerating, but the place *was* only half-occupied. Most of the patrons were silently drinking, and they all seemed to be locals; half of them appeared to be craftsmen, and the other half small-time peddlers.

Workers whose company headquarters were on the mainland were conspicuously absent. This was most likely because they knew that making a show of their companies’ good business would only earn them contempt from the locals.

For a traveler, however, the opposite was true. As soon as Lawrence generously offered to treat the others to meat and liquor, the fat and alcohol became the ideal lubricant that got them talking endlessly.

“Just look at this lifeless place! Hey, you guys! This here is how you should be eating and drinking at a tavern!”

“Ah shut up, old man! Aren’t you the same, always shunning the good stuff for that watery beer they brew right over the muddy ground?”

“Yeah! I hear you even top your bread with so many beans your wife goes mad in tears!”

**Note: our best guess is that he ate beans instead of meat (to save money), and his wife had to deal with the after-effects.**

The taverner began joking loudly with the regulars, causing a wave of laughter. One town merchant had told Lawrence that in times of bad business the locals would often feel like the world was beyond saving. A generous traveler could spark a new hope in their hearts at those times, where they would believe some good still remained in the world.

“By the way, whereabouts you traveling from, good sir?”

Since eating nothing but roast mutton would eventually disgust them, Lawrence and company also ordered a mutton stew with sauerkraut. The taverner posed his question as he delivered that dish to their table. He didn't address it to Holo, but it wasn't because of her youthful appearance; she was too busy eating mutton. Watching her eat so greedily made all the other guests want to cheer her on.

“From Gerube on the mainland. Before that I was traveling in countries further down south.”

“Gerube..? Oh! There's been some great commotion there lately, hasn't there? What was it.. Hey! Hans! What happened in Gerube again?”

“It was the Narwhale, wasn't it? How d'you even do business with such poor information, ya old

coot? I hear they reeled up one a'them devils of the frozen sea. Caused quite a stir, too! The Lyon Company's boatmen that just came into harbor told me so.”

One needed to be wary of how quickly information could even cross the oceans. The Narwhale fiasco only ended a few days ago, after all.

“Right right right! The Narwhale, that was it. Say, are the rumors true?”

The owner's face was full of curiosity as he asked. He would never suspect that the one who turned the tides of that commotion was sitting before his very eyes. Lawrence turned to Holo to share a furtive smile with her.. only to discover that she wasn't paying any attention to him at all.

If he glanced over at Cole right now, the boy would surely recognize his intent and smile at their shared secret. Yet which of those two companions with such different dispositions would Lawrence wish to show the greater kindness to? The answer was obvious.

“They're true. The whole town was almost split in two – north and south – because of it all. In the end one company readied several crates of gold coins, hauled them to the Church, and loudly demanded they be sold the Narwhale. Because of all that commotion we didn't get a moment's leisure.”

“Oh.. crates full of gold coins, huh?”

All of the guests surrounding Lawrence and listening visibly responded to his mention of gold-filled crates. Given their reaction it was all too simple to see where their interests currently lay.

“Then what brings the three of you all the way up here from countries further south of Gerube? You're here to do business, aren't you?”

“Nah, we're here on a pilgrimage to the Brondel Monastery.”

Lawrence intentionally avoided the topic of money, having noted how sensitive it was to his audience. From his perspective, at least half of them seemed to be either merchants or craftsmen. Were he honest about his true motives it would be impossible to gather information, as they'd probably be busily trying to hock their wares.

“Oh, the Brondel Monastery, huh..”

“Hard as it may be to believe, these two with me are indeed children of God. Though it's contrary to my nature, I've been moved and am acting likely to purify my sins.”

“I see. But a merchant on a pilgrimage to the Brondel Monastery.. pretty ironic, huh?”

Though it had escaped Lawrence's notice, a cup full of wine had made its way into the

taverner's hands. As the man spoke he glanced around for the other guest's agreement. The smile that had surfaced on his face, as well as the other's, was clearly sarcastic. Lawrence did his best to don the guise of an ignorant traveler.

“Why's that ironic?”

“Well, 'cos the Brondel Monastery's eye for business is stronger than legend would have it, and it's not been kind to pilgrims for many a year. Most foreigners headed there pass through our town, and I've already seen far too many come back with faces full of disappointment.”

“They're supposed to give money to fix up roads and inns for pilgrims, but the amount they've given for that is slim indeed considering the huge sums they make from the wool trade! Even a child can see how their scales tilt. May the Almighty's protection be upon us!”

Hearing a merchant-like customer voice that opinion made the taverner nod his head vigorously. Be it a company or a monastery, the route it went down always seemed to be the same whenever a desire for money surfaced.. even if they seemed to forfeit a great deal in the process as well.

“It's likely 'cos they keep doing such things that they've finally earned some divine retribution. Winfield's wool sales have been pitiful for some reason the past few years, and no one's been hit harder than the monastery. Even merchants as docile as a wee lamb won't go there anymore. All the pilgrims they've brushed off won't be coming back to line their coffers now, no matter how desperate they are.”

“But to think that a foreign merchant would seek a pilgrimage there in such times.. maybe that divine retribution is coming to an end. Shame, it served 'em right.”

Because of how much people revered religious institutions it was all the more astonishing to see how harshly those people turned on them when that reverence subsided. All of the patrons at the tavern were bad-mouthing the monastery in high spirits. This meant that probing for information about the Ruvik Alliance should be a snap.

“So that's how things are.. does that mean no one visits the monastery these days?”

The taverner's facial expression became complicated upon hearing that question. *That thought brings me such joy, yet also a hint of sadness* - that seemed to be what it was saying. In spite of everything, the monastery was still an important center of faith and was deeply ingrained in the heart of every Winfieldian.

“Some do. Many merchants gather there even now. But they're a bit different from the kind we're used to. You've heard of the Ruvik Alliance, have you sir?”

Holo's stopped taking huge bites of mutton and took a drink from her wine cup as if coming up

for air.. but that was clearly no mere coincidence. She could tell that the topics that had stirred up a lively atmosphere had come to an end.

“You mean the number one economic alliance, whose name is known the world over?”

“The very same. I hear their men are entering the monastery grounds in droves. At first it was high-ranking officials coming in black carriages, but maybe 'cos of the harsh winter climate they were soon replaced by merchants going on foot. I hear that ever since, those merchants go in and out one after the other, trying to be the first to finalize negotiations. Because of that we've had nothing but stone-faced merchants all year, heading right over the grassy plains without so much as casting a glance at my tavern.”

“Just what kind of negotiations are they having?”

Whatever Lawrence heard next should either prove or disprove Deutschmann's claims. That was the only reason he asked, so the answer took him completely by surprise.

“Don't laugh, but they're here to buy the Golden Sheep.”

Lawrence could swear he heard Holo's ears flip up under her hood. For his part, all he could do was stare at the taverner incredulously.

“That legend always seems to surface whenever bad times come, that the monastery owns a grassy plain stretching far as the eye can see, and at one end of that snowy land walks a dazzling sheep of gold, like an incarnation of the very sun.”

“Legend has it that a man once plucked a bit of its golden wool, but it dissolved like a thread of light the moment it was separated from its body.”

Lawrence had heard many legends like this. In times of war, the worse off a nation was the more such legends came into being. Stories of the Holy Mother's statues crying, witches grinning from ear to ear as they kidnapped children, and enormous flags with the Church's emblem fluttering around in the heavens.

In fact the legend of the Golden Sheep of the Brondel Monastery was widely known on the mainland. Each time the world descended into darkness, that legend would miraculously bring new hope.

“They're probably *really* here for the monastery's name, or its land.”

“There's a rumor the alliance is aiming to become Winfield aristocracy.”

“But King Sylvan's the grandson of King Winfield the First - he couldn't possibly allow men to buy into nobility. A merchant once bought the name of a fallen noble, and it so earned the

king's wrath that he decreed a law making them lose big in the wool trade, so now it's come to this."

The man who spoke was gesturing a beheading with his hand. Lawrence realized that very merchant must have been the former husband of a certain someone he knew.

"No one's got any money, but the King keeps raising the taxes. Although, maybe it's more accurate to say he's being so excessive *because* no one's got any money."

"You three are good customers, so I'll give you a warning - if you're planning on going to the monastery, then be careful. The house of God's been taken over by devils. The god who should be coming to our aid's been long lost in the grassy plains, unseen and unheard for ages."

At this point Lawrence had no idea anymore if the locals were bad-mouthing the monastery or the Ruvik Alliance. Maybe they didn't even know who they wanted to criticize anymore. Maybe it was just enough for them to have something to complain about. But no matter who they were directing their complaints at, it wasn't out of pure hatred.

Both the king and the alliance were entities living in a world beyond their own, and the monastery was still something they looked up to even if it *had* fallen. The emotional paradoxes in the hearts of the locals was plain for anyone to see. Because of that, Lawrence felt he understood their hardships.

"Thank you. We'll be careful."

"Aye, then you'd best eat and drink grandly so you'll have enough energy! As soon as you leave town, you'll be greeted by snow-covered fields. Without enough vitality, you'll fall dead on the way!"

The taverner's words heated the atmosphere up again. Lawrence raised his cup and drank a toast to him. Cole already seemed to be at his limit, but Holo seemed capable of drinking more.

The Brondel Monastery, situated on a snowy plain.. if that was their destination, it would indeed be wise to properly fill their stomachs beforehand.

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He heard a crackling, like the sound of burning firewood. But they didn't start a campfire last night, did they? Oh, that's right, the fireplace.. they *had* used that the previous night. It just sounded different from the campfires he was used to. His thoughts finally started clicking, and he opened his eyes and lifted his head.

The room was still dim, so it had to be early. He could tell whether the outside weather was

good or bad just by the kind of light that was seeping in through the seams of the window. Alas, it was shaping up to be a gloomy day.

He was just thinking to himself that it would be a cold one, when a wave of frigid air mercilessly flung itself at him and roused him completely. It seemed the cold had already infiltrated into their room, but despite that he could still hear the crackling of burning firewood.

“It’s snowing huh,”

He muttered to himself before letting out a big yawn, then sat up. His wool-stuffed blanket had indeed kept him nice and warm. In fact, it had been quite a while since he’d slept so soundly. Even Holo seemed to be in a deep sleep. Her fluffy blanket made the regular rising and falling of her breaths seem even more dramatic than usual.

But it sure was cold. It felt like he’d fallen into an icy river. Glancing toward Cole’s bed, he discovered that he, like Holo, had curled up into a ball and covered himself entirely. Lawrence was the only one who slept with his face exposed.

He rubbed that face a few times before exhaling a wisp of white air. He then rose from bed, shivered a moment, walked to the desk, picked up the water jug, and gave it a shake. He hadn’t hoped for the best, and indeed the water inside was frozen solid.

“Guess I’ll just have to go downstairs and get some more..”

Since he began his travels with Holo, Lawrence’s habit of talking to himself had grown far less frequent. At times like this, though, he’d still inevitably fall back into old habits and mutter a line or two to himself.

He tossed some straw onto the meager flames still lingering in the fireplace, then waited for them to ignite before tossing in a little more firewood. It might look fancy, but a brick fireplace like this could still extinguish its own flames simply from the coldness of the bricks themselves.

Once the fire was going again he left the room. The hall was dead silent, but it didn’t feel like it was from a lack of patrons or the early hour. Instead it felt as if something was eating up all the sound. The floorboards creaked with every step, but it wasn’t of any concern. Such quietness, akin to being covered in cotton, was something unique to snowy days.

Once on the ground floor he realized that the inn wasn’t yet open for business, and the wooden latch still barred the doors of the entrance. He did, however, hear another door opening deep down the hallway which lead to the central courtyard. Shortly after that he saw a red-nosed innkeeper with a scarf wound around his neck carrying a barrel over his shoulder.

“Oh? You’re sure up early.”

“Morning.”

“God damn it's freezing! Even the well was frozen. It was a pain just to break through the surface ice. Looks like the lid's gonna cover us today.”

The man carried the barrel to the far end of the hallway and emptied it into an urn that was there. Those who lived through extremely cold winters had to worry constantly about water when temperatures started to drop. Having to stress over water when there was so much snow was pretty ridiculous, all things considered.

“The lid's going cover us?”

“Oh, we say that 'round here when snow's about to cover everything up. It only takes a day for the whole landscape to turn pure white.”

“I see.”

“Oh, yeah, you want anything? I can prepare my guests some breakfast.. it'll take a bit of time, though.”

“Oh, don't trouble yourself over breakfast. To be honest, we brought back a lot of food from the tavern last night.”

The bar had been so boisterous that the town's night patrol even came around. They ultimately had no choice but to pack up their leftovers and leave. Each of the dishes were top-quality cuisine, so it would still make for a delicious breakfast after being reheated on the fireplace.

“Hahaha! Such good mutton isn't easy to come by. It'd be a terrible waste if no one ate it.”

“Indeed! Oh, right, might I trouble you for some water, though?”

“Of course, of course. Hmm.. right, the water in that metal jug must have frozen, eh? I'll bring a crate of sawdust upstairs in a bit. If you keep a jug of water in that it won't freeze up as quickly.”

“I'd appreciate it.”

Lawrence headed back to his room after receiving a more down-to-earth clay jug of water from the innkeeper, thinking that “being covered by a lid” was quite an apt description for a snowy day. He recalled a mercenary saying something similar one night, as they drank cheap liquor to stave off the cold at a cheap lodge.

*If one must wage war, they should wage it in the north where all pain and sadness, no matter how great, will eventually be buried by the snow.*

Snowflakes tended to bring melancholy with them wherever they fell. He opened the door to their room with a wry smile.

“Oh? You’re up, are—”

He cut himself off when he noticed that the mood in the room demanded his silence. On her bed sat Holo, silently looking out the window. She just sat there staring straight ahead; if not for the puffs of white breath that escaped her lips, it wouldn't be a stretch to say she looked like a clay statue.

She was still staring out of the window like that even after he'd closed the door behind him. There was still wood burning in the fireplace, but he added some more before placing the water jug on the table and approaching Holo's bedside.

“It is snowing.”

She spoke without turning her head. He followed her gaze before replying “yeah” and seating himself next to her. She continued staring outside. She sat neither cross-legged nor hugging her knees, but like someone frozen in a particular instant of time as they silently peered out of a window.

Frigid air was pouring in through the open window. Sighing lightly, Lawrence put his hand on her head. Her beautiful hair was frozen into cold strands. It was all too obvious what the snow was reminding her of, so instead of hugging her tightly he simply sat next to her.

“..”

“What else do you see?”

She looked at him wordlessly in response. Her expressionless face no longer seemed frozen, but rather more like the emotions under its surface were beginning to thaw. Her pale lips had regained some color as well.

“So you do know how to be a little considerate, after all.”



“Mind that you don’t fall ill.”

He chose to say that instead of replying to her sarcasm. The moment she nodded, she sneezed and was under her covers the very next instant. He then stood up and shut the window.

“Were I in my original form, I could watch for as long as I wished.”

“Until you were completely buried, you mean.”

She simply smiled at his words and pointed at the water jug. But as he passed it over to her, she took his hand in hers.

“I told you nothing would happen even if it snowed, did I not?”

She revealed a faint smile as she spoke. For her, a snowy day wasn't suitable for capering. She'd lingered for centuries in Pasloe village where it never snowed, unlike her homeland of Yoitsu. He clasped her icy hand and replied.

“How can I be sure, when you're not the frail kind of maiden whose always in tears? It wouldn't surprise me to see you running around in snowy fields, all full of energy.”

“..”

With a silent smile, she straightened her body and drank from the water jug. But as she did, the smile turned into a frown and she glared at him.

“Why is this not wine?”

“Foolish girl.”

He imitated her scolding tone of voice, to which she shoved the jug back into his arms and flung herself onto the bed like a child throwing a tantrum.

“What? You're still gonna sleep? Today's breakfast should be quite something, you know.”

Snowflakes indeed tended to bring melancholy with them wherever they fell. And yet, delicious food indisputably spread joy in the same way.

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Just as one might expect from a land where shepherds thrived, there was a leather pouch chock-full of butter in the food they had brought back with them the night before. Holo wore a joyous expression as she spread that butter on a slice of oat bread and proceeded to stuff her face. Cole, on the other hand, didn't even have his usual meager appetite; he'd been awakened too early, and Holo's table manners weren't helping.

“So what - mmph - shall we do - mmph - next?”

“Don't talk with your mouth full. Deutschmann said he'd introduce us to a company belonging to the Ruvik Alliance, so for now let's just wait for them to contact us.”

“Very well - mmph.”

Holo paused to breathe after finally swallowing her mouthful of oat bread, and just as he thought she was opening her mouth to say something else, she took another huge bite.

“Are you getting ready to hibernate or something?”

“That is - mmph - not a bad idea either.”

Nothing anyone said would seriously register in her mind when there was delicious food in front of her to enjoy. Lawrence pinned some mutton in a slice of bread that he'd warmed up over the fire and took a bite of it.

“But it'll be pretty tough traveling in such freezing, snowy weather, won't it?”

Cole finally cut in, having cheerfully watched Holo and Lawrence while sipping on a cup of warmed sheep's milk.

“Yeah. Speaking of which, how'd you manage to travel on your own before?”

“The weather wasn't too rough when I left home, so it wasn't too bad, but when I crossed the Roam river it suddenly got really cold. I eventually learned to avoid the snowy places as I traveled.”

“I figured as much. With those clothes of yours, if you'd happened to get caught in snow heaven knows whether you'd wake up again if you fell asleep.”

Lawrence removed a chunk of fat that the boy had stuck to his cheek. Cole laughed, but Lawrence couldn't tell if he was more embarrassed about that or his shabby clothes.

“Well, people take precautions in areas covered in snow. They set up signposts at regular intervals with small cabins near them, in case there's a blizzard. I once went to a place named Arohitostok, where the blizzards are savage, but because of that at least you'll never run into bandits. Even bears and wolves retreat to caves for shelter from the terrible cold, making it surprisingly easy to travel.”

**Note: Holo also casually mentioned Arohitostok in volume 1 when she and Lawrence first met.**

“You've been to Arohitostok? Isn't that one of the northernmost towns?”

"I was asked once to deliver the belongings of a deceased traveler there. Just that once. It's in the northwest, even remote compared to the Dolan Plains. I bore witness to that legendary land that's like the surface of a tranquil sea. Quite a breathtaking sight that was."

It was said that long ago a dragon stirred up an intense gale as it soared to ends of the sky, pulling up all the trees and grass by their roots and only leaving behind that barren tract of land. Because all the precipitation in that expanse was snow, it was surprisingly dry near Arohitostok in spite of the cold. It was such a desolate place that one would realize just how small they really were.

"According to legend, saint Alajai spent thirty years there in self-meditation. Having visited there, I feel I can truly understand why he'd be called a saint for that."

"Amazing.."

Cole gasped as he listened intently to Lawrence's story. Holo's mood had lately grown sour after she finished eating, but there seemed to be nothing they could do about it. Unlike Cole, she was never willing to patiently listen to Lawrence, so it only made sense that he'd show her a different attitude. He inwardly hoped that the heavens would forgive him treating them unequally.

"I learned the names of towns everywhere when I was in school, but really I've been to so few of them.."

"It's the same for just about everyone. It's because I very rarely join any merchant caravans or fix my trade routes that I'm able to travel to such remote places and see all the things I've seen."

"Have you been to any southern towns?"

"Well I expect *you're* more familiar with them than I am, but I've also been to countries in the east--"

Lawrence paused, but it wasn't because Holo had finally burst into tears from her isolation - there was a knock at their door.

"Coming!"

Cole spiritedly responded and stood up, being accustomed to taking care of these kinds of menial errands. Holo was still eating her breakfast, but Lawrence only needed a quick peek at her to see that she was in a bad mood - she didn't even bother to put on her hood. He reverently pulled it over her head for her.

"Who is it?"

Cole opened the door to reveal a man dressed from head to toe in traveling gear, who reminded Lawrence of Eve. He wore a turban and a scarf around his head and face, and had two overcoats going down to his ankles. On his shins were animal skins still with their fur, and he had a gunnysack slung over his shoulder.

He truly seemed ready for an immediate and long hike through the snow. In fact, there was already some snow on his head and shoulders. He threw a curious glance in their direction from deep under his turban before unwrapping it, appearing to have arrived in town just recently.

“Is this the room where Mr. Kraft Lawrence is lodged?”

His voice was surprisingly young. It was followed by the man's equally young face as it emerged from under his turban.

“Yes. I am Lawrence.”

“Then it *is* you. I apologize for not being dressed more formally. I only just received word from Mr. Deutschmann, which is why I came at such an inconvenient hour.”

Lawrence rose to his feet and walked toward the door. For Deutschmann to have sent this man meant that he was a member of the Ruvik Alliance.

“Please don’t say that. We're the ones who should be paying *you* a visit. Please do come in.”

“Please pardon my intrusion, then.”

The man entered the room with light steps; he was slightly shorter than Lawrence but it was strange that he could walk with such an easy gait while laden with all the baggage that he carried. If he was a traveling merchant, he was surely one who traveled through harsh regions for a living.

“Wow! What a splendid room.”

“Normally, we wouldn’t be able to afford anything like it.”

“Haha! I suppose this counts as a professional perk. I too spent a time of luxury here at the start of the fall.”

The man's blonde hair was quite striking, perhaps because it had been cut very short. He had a cheerful tone of voice that made him seem quite amiable. Even Holo seemed surprised by it.

“Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm a member of Phils Company, affiliated with the Ruvik Alliance. My name is Lago Pisky.”

“Then allow me to reintroduce myself as well: I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trading Guild. I normally do my business on set routes on the mainland.”

“Ah, then this is surely God's work! I'm sure you can tell by my manner of dress, but I too am a traveling merchant.”

After a quick exchange and handshake, Lawrence discovered the man's palms were as rough as his own, and felt slightly more relaxed. Holo had picked up her breakfast and moved to the edge of the bed, so Lawrence invited Pisky to join him at the table.

“So Mr. Deutschmann tells me the three of you plan on heading to the Brondel Monastery, correct?”

Pisky didn't strike Lawrence as hasty. He seemed the type that Lawrence rarely encountered; the type who'd rather spend his free time shaving the edges of silver coins than making idle conversation.

“If possible, we want to head to the merchant-exclusive branch that's closer to the main branch, and not the branch established for pilgrims.”

Lawrence had no intention of revealing that they were searching for the wolf-deity's bones. They had been unaware of the bone's whereabouts prior to this, but having learned they were likely to be at the monastery made it a reckless thing to blurt out. Especially since Pisky was a member of the Ruvik Alliance.

“..Since you were introduced by Mr. Deutschmann, I won't inquire as to your purpose. But from what you just said, I take it that you're not going to purchase wool?”

His eyes looked straight into Lawrence's. For someone to request a guide to the monastery, yet be unwilling to reveal why.. well, it only made sense that the guide would react thusly.

Lawrence, however, was undaunted. He was convinced that Keeman and Eve's trust bought him not only Deutschmann's, but Pisky's as well. Trust was like an invisible form of currency. Pisky's face soon broke into a smile.

“Well, whatever your reasons, I often guide people interested in witnessing our competition with the monastery first-hand, for a bit of side profit of course. I won't push you any further. Besides, simply gathering some people often draws a much larger crowd.”

A business deal couldn't be established without potential customers. Taking that into account, one could see how attractive it was to do business in a place where many merchants gathered. Of course, it was important to not carelessly mention the kind of business one intended to do, if they sought large profits. Pisky was naturally aware of that.

“The banner of the moon and shield shall always sway in the wind, so little things do not concern us.”

Lawrence of course knew the unspoken line that was meant to follow that one: “However, anyone wishing to interfere with our business won't be let off easily.”

“My thanks. Of course I'll have a large gift prepared as a token of our gratitude.”

Pisky revealed a sincere smile at that, proving that he was indeed a merchant. They shook hands once more to symbolically establish a contract.

“Then, as I am an impatient person, I wish to discuss our departure with you right away. Will everyone here be going to the monastery?”

“Indeed. Will that make it difficult to use the purchase of wool as an excuse?”

Setting aside Cole, Holo certainly didn't look like anyone related to business.

“Not at all, not at all. It's not unusual for one to bring a clergy member along when seeking spiritual peace on a business journey. Besides, the atmosphere at the Brondel Monastery's merchant branch is festive at the moment, so no matter who comes now he or she won't particularly stand out. As long as you manage to pass the gates at the front entrance, you should be fine.”

“That's great news.”

Lawrence did his best to sound relieved. He wasn't putting on an act to fool anyone, but rather because Pisky sounded a bit too easy-going – it was a reminder to not let his guard down.

“So, about our departure time..”

“We can leave at any time.”

“I see. To be honest, I've taken on the role of a liaison between the monastery and the trade companies on the mainland, so I must part ways as soon as possible to increase my own value.”

Pisky's self-conscious words seemed to be an intentional imitation of the roundabout way Winfieldians spoke. Lawrence looked at Holo and Cole. Both nodded to indicate that they had no problem with leaving right away.

“This was our request, so even if we must leave straight away it won't be a problem for us.”

“Excellent. In that case I plan on departing at the noon-time bell.”

“Will we go on foot?”

“No, we’ll go on horseback. Though the snow here still hasn't piled up, the monastery grounds are already covered in a thick layer. I'll prepare the horses myself, but please do prepare your own food. Oh! And..”

He smiled before mysteriously continuing.

“There's no need to exchange your money into local currency.”

The first thing traveling merchants did when they came to a new region was exchange their currency. Lawrence made no attempt to hold back his laughter upon hearing a joke that only traveling merchants would understand.

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## Chapter 2

They rode on horseback, with Cole sitting up front and Lawrence at the rear, but it didn't feel too crowded, even with Holo stuck between them. Long-haired horses were used to drag sleighs across the snowy plains of Winfield, which were as vast as the rumors claimed.

“Curses.. such an arrogant-looking thing.”

Those were the words that slipped from Holo's mouth when they rendezvoused with Pisky and she lay her eyes on the horse he had prepared for them; those words left a deep impression on Lawrence.

Of course her true form was considerably larger than the beast. Her indignant response to its giant physique was likely from her frustration at being so oblivious; the world she knew was tiny and insignificant compared to the vastness of the real thing. Mainland horses of this size were exceptionally rare.

“Are you all set?”

Pisky asked his question from atop the more modest horse he had straddled and taken the reigns of. Lawrence indicated that they were ready, though he left their own horse's reigns alone: it already had a driver to guide it.

Its immense body would have gone to terrible waste were it only carrying people. Even a humble mule could carry the carefully-positioned baggage of four adults, even if it could barely carry a child without panting.

Lawrence looked back and saw it was pulling a cart with a mountainous pile of goods. On it were such things as food and liquor for the monastery's merchant branch. He'd heard that by the time snow had covered the roads, such carts were replaced with sleds. Pisky's job was to travel to and fro between the monastery and mainland companies, relaying information and transporting such goods.

“Then let us pray to the gods for a safe trip.”

That seemed a fitting ritual to begin a journey to a monastery. They made their departure after praying, in conjunction with the noon-time tolling of the church bell.

The day's weather was far from ideal and it was extremely cold. Although the “lid hadn't covered them” yet, the snow on the dirt road had created a muddy, pant-leg-soiling mess for travelers on foot. And yet once they'd left town, the harvested fields that stretched farther than the eye could see were almost entirely covered in snow.

The scene before them truly befit a kingdom nicknamed the country of grassy plains; the world was pure white no matter where one looked. They tracked a muddy trail behind them that stretched out beyond their range of vision.

Everyone had dressed in several layers, and effectively looked like big round lumps. On top of that, Lawrence and his companions had wrapped themselves in animal-skin coats and gloves that they borrowed from the inn.

In spite of their dress, the freezing wind eventually found its way through to them as they rode on horseback. Before they knew it, Holo was holding Cole close to her and Lawrence was holding her.

Silence presided over their journey. All they heard was the snow falling on their hoods and their own breathing, intentionally slowed to warm the freezing air before it entered their lungs. Even those sounds rang out clearly in the deadness. It was now apparent why northerners spoke so little, and why they didn't open their mouths much when they did.

In fact, it was also easier to see why silence was one of the rules monks imposed on themselves while on spiritual journeys: to conserve energy. The heavens were obscured with snowflakes, and it soon grew dark. Their journey hadn't been particularly long, but they were still exhausted when they finally arrived at their lodgings after their first day.

One revered monk had given up on speaking altogether, saying that talking "was a luxury." The truth behind those words might be evident now, but Lawrence and his party were worldlier people than that monk. Holo was probably the worldliest of all, and her nerves seemed frazzled after that monotonous silence.

She fell straight into bed without so much as brushing the snow off of her hood. Lawrence had no intention of scolding her. He knew the expression on her face was probably the same one that was on Cole's right now, who had slumped onto a chair in exhaustion. It was the kind of soulless expression that revealed just how close one was to physical collapse.

All those superstitions about the undead in cold, rural villages undoubtedly originated from sightings of travelers in this state.

"Cole."

Hearing Lawrence call his name made the boy, who truly seemed undead, return an empty gaze.

"Just smile - it'll all be better before you know it."

Cole's solitary travels prior to meeting them had probably already taught him this wisdom. He

nodded his head with a forced smile.

“Then let’s go eat. Pisky should already have arranged dinner for us with the inn.”

“Alright..”

Cole rose to his feet. While the worldly boy removed his snow-covered coat, Lawrence took the opportunity to approach Holo, who hadn't budged an inch after she collapsed. He removed her hood.

“I’m sure you already know this, but you won’t be able to sleep just by lying down like this. Your body will feel much better if you go have a drink of wine someplace warm.”

Sleepiness and fatigue seemed somewhat familiar, but they were two very different things. Holo's ears drooped and quivered meekly as if to say, “I already know that.” But she still made no effort to rise, like a person unable to bring themselves to climb out of their warm covers despite knowing it was time to get up.

Having no choice he picked her up - only to discover a look on her face like a princess under a sleeping curse, awaiting a hero to rouse her with a magic kiss. But he was no hero. Undoing her actual plague-like curse would require a very different kind of magic.

“I've heard they distill their liquor here to such a concentration that even the tiniest spark will set it ablaze.”

Her drooping ears shot up like tents the moment he whispered that into them. She cast a questioning glance at him, wordlessly asking “is that true?”

“Anything more watery than that'll quickly freeze around here, so to stay warm they have to make liquor that won't even freeze in ice. Even if it's colder than ice, the moment you drink it you'll be filled with a burning sensation.”

Her eyes glimmered with renewed light. She gulped, as if to free herself from the shackles of her curse, then lifted herself up, swaying unsteadily. Her drooping tail, which had looked like it belonged to a wild dog that hadn't eaten in three days, finally seemed re-energized.

“..Although I’m afraid sauerkraut might be all we have to go with our liquor.”

He opted to clarify this up front, fearing her outrage if he kept it to himself. She momentarily seemed to lose her balance as she climbed out of bed, but the allure of the liquor was strong enough for her to regain it after considerable effort.

“It is better than nothing.”

“That's a very good attitude to take.”

Their interactions made him recall something as they left their room. When they stopped at a certain town, Holo drank a kind of burning wine and commented that it reminded her of her homeland's liquor. That must have been a wonderful sensation to complement the liquor.. it might even be its own form of nutrition when one was this fatigued. It would be another two days before they reached the Brondel Monastery, so he carried her on his back while silently counting the coins in his wallet.

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*The food here's expensive, tastes awful, and smells just as bad.*

That was a line even a child could memorize, and more easily than a Bible verse. The stench of garlic wafting over from the table next to theirs was a quiet testament to the fact. Using garlic was synonymous with being poor. Despite his conviction that he'd always eaten modestly, even Lawrence's impression was that his meals had been luxurious compared to this.

Cole's stomach was the only one rumbling at the smell from the other table. After all, he'd been had nothing but dried turnips on his previous travels. But despite having not smelled it for a long time now, Lawrence couldn't find his appetite.. much less the keen-nosed Holo.

In spite of their reaction they were very fortunate, and not because they paid a lot or because the kitchen had somehow run out of garlic. Pisky had anticipated their reaction and cooked their food himself.

“Since I travel frequently in the north, I help out with cooking whenever I'm snowed in. Thus I've learned to do it myself.”

He had placed a bowl of delicious, lightly-seasoned mutton soup on their table. “Lightly seasoned” soup was usually ginger, green onions, dried mutton and sheep's leg bones stewed in very salty water. But this soup also contained a very special ingredient.

Pisky lowered his face before finally unveiling what ingredient was. It was none other than what was being voraciously eaten by the travelers at the table next to theirs: garlic. Adding a small amount of garlic was the secret behind this transparent broth with a thin greasy skin forming on it.

Soaking in that bowl of mutton soup was a loaf of oat bread, which was normally difficult to eat on its own. This way, however, one could drink the soup while letting it soak into the bread. The result was no longer an ordeal to force down, having being transformed into something quite palatable instead.

Lawrence felt nothing but gratitude toward Pisky, thankful not only for the deliciousness of the food but also because it distracted Holo; she had all but forgotten the strong, highly-distilled

liquor he had brought up earlier.

“Water you take on the road with you tends to become distasteful, so if there aren't pools or rivers around then you can just boil it with ingredients like this and it's no longer a problem.”

Holo was continuously chewing on the mutton with wooden spoon in hand. She was already on her third bowl. Even Cole, who was normally restrained, went for seconds. It was a testament to how delicious it truly was.

“It's quite amazing that you can even use murky water to make something this tasty. But this is only really possible when you're traveling with a number of others, isn't it? If you made this all the time when traveling alone, it seems it would be quite a waste of money.”

“Exactly so. I've often traveled in teams of merchants, so even at my age I've had plenty of training in this.”

For business or safety, traveling in a group was more beneficial than traveling alone. Pisky, however, was revealing the acuteness unique to somehow who'd had to endure many solitary journeys.

Watching him called to Lawrence's mind the image of a lone, proud merchant climbing a steep cliff. That being said, he seemed well aware that he gave off that impression, and explained that he often found himself described that way by others.

“But that's something in the past. Even when we merchants band together, we always remain a team.. never a family.”

“In a moment of crisis, the key to gauging profit lies in whether or not one can survive.”

Pisky shrugged, though one corner of his mouth was raised as he answered.

“Correct.”

Lawrence had occasionally traveled with other merchants before he began sitting alone in the driver's seat of his cart. When business was good he'd travel with the same group for a while. He couldn't pinpoint when he finally stopped traveling with others. Perhaps he'd grown tired of the attitude of grouping only over a common desire for money, but the real reason he decided to stop was surely the same reason Pisky had stopped.

When such a group was attacked by a pack of wolves, each of them fled while praying to the gods that the wolves would single out someone else. When the wolves finally chose their victim, the one who drew the short end of the stick would cry out “save me” in an unbearably chilling and tragic manner.

“And it's not as though I'm unaware that a group of traveling merchants can't compete against a town's merchants. I ultimately decided to become a town merchant's subordinate. In exchange for some of my freedom I can always head to designated towns knowing that I'll be welcomed there by smiling comrades. Indeed, that's a rare kind of reward.”

Holo had begun drinking her liquor, but it couldn't have been because she was already full. Pisky's words were likely stirring up a lot of memories inside of her. Anyone who'd lived the life of a traveler, Cole included, could understand exactly what Pisky was talking about.

“By that token, if it was the Ruvik Alliance's membership that welcomed you then the rewards would be far greater.”

“Of course, and it would let you grow your business ambitions as well.”

“I see. Yet despite the change in lifestyle, your cooking skills don't seem to have dulled.. ah, my apologies. I'm just having a hard time drawing a connection between your adept traveling skills and your excellent culinary skills.”

“Haha! You're certainly not the first one to say that. The truth is that I still prepare meals for a lot of people during my travels, like I'm doing now.”

Lawrence had heard that a lot of sightseers had crowded into the Brondel Monastery. But going by Pisky's tone, his side job of leading sightseers to the monastery wasn't exactly a flourishing business. But when he'd introduced himself, he'd mentioned that his job was relaying information and transporting goods for the Ruvik Alliance. As such, the possibilities for what he was actually doing were very limited.



“Hehehe.. every experienced merchant asks me the same question, Mr. Lawrence, and in turn my answer's always the same.”

With a cheerful smile he swept his gaze over to Holo and Cole and spoke dramatically.

“My journey is still only beginning. I have time enough to think.”

A merchant without curiosity was like a clergyman without faith, so him saying something like this was a surefire way to get his audience into a thinking frame of mind. On the back of a horse surrounded by cold silence, thinking was the perfect way to kill some time.

“Just so you know, I don't often go to the Brondel Monastery.”

On this kind of boring journey, a mealtime guessing game would surely earn Pisky a lot of praise. He'd surely hook his audience with this act that it was just another piece of merchandise he was proud of. And indeed, Holo continued her meal with an expression saying “I have no interest in such boring games,” but the meat in her bowl wasn't decreasing. As expected, the straightforward Cole was utterly frozen, spoon in hand, staring at the wood grain patterns of the table.

Their reactions must have enjoyable to the one providing their entertainment, but it made Lawrence feel a bit frustrated. Only veteran merchants would react as he had to Pisky, and only veteran merchants would know the answer to his riddle. Not only that, but even if the answer was worth a laugh or two, Pisky surely couldn't be sure what part of it his audience would end up laughing at. Lawrence himself would be laughing uncomfortably, being troubled by the answer.

“Now then, I don't want anyone to lose any sleep thinking this one over, so feel free to just up and ask me. I'll gladly reveal the answer, anytime.”

Pisky's final challenge was enough to deepen the furrow on the brows of the two easily-tempted individuals before them, and guaranteed they would lose sleep over it. If Lawrence didn't make a move and speak up, they'd likely be frozen in thought for God knows how long.

“Besides, if you work too hard to figure it out you'll just get hungry again, and the answer isn't going to fill your stomach.”

Since an empty stomach was also a guarantee they'd be alert on this boring journey, the two of them snapped back to reality in surprise and resumed eating. Lawrence and Pisky shared a glance and chuckled softly. It didn't matter what anyone else said, a joyous meal was the finest of luxuries to Lawrence.

“If only the Brondel Monastery was all the way at the end of the Earth.”

“I may be good, but I couldn't possibly have enough riddles for that kind of trip.”

Laughing, dining, and drinking; that was how they all spent their evening.

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It began snowing hard on the next day. It was fortunate that a strong wind wasn't blowing as well, or the thumbnail-sized snowflakes blowing around would reduce their visibility drastically. Of course, they pulled their hoods down so low that their visibility was already reduced to just whatever their white breath didn't obscure.

But that was hardly an obstacle for their horse's driver, who had forty years of experience riding back and forth on this route. It was as normal to him as the intricate web-like network of trade was to an elderly town merchant seated behind a counter and losing his sight.

Once they'd left their lodge, that reticent driver led their horse on as a steady pace across the white plains, having replaced the cart with a sled. They moved without stopping, since even a brief pause would be enough to completely cover them in snow. The scenery that greeted them as they pressed on was always white, followed by more white.

After finishing his lunch, Cole couldn't help but doze off on the horse's back. They were only on a horse, but that was still frighteningly high up off the ground. If he fell off, he could be gravely injured. Concerned, Lawrence took out some rope he'd prepared and was about to tie it around Cole and Holo when he noticed that Holo wasn't in the deep slumber he assumed she'd be in, and had her arms wrapped tightly around Cole.

“Oh, you're awake?”

The snow wasn't just lowering their visibility, but was dampening the sounds around them as well. In spite of the silence, Lawrence could barely even hear his own voice. It stood to reason that Pisky wouldn't hear them from his horse, trailing behind them.

“I am not.”

He almost laughed out loud at her reply, voiced as if she was half-asleep. But he knew better; she was responding that way because she was in a bad mood, likely grumpy because of Pisky's riddle from dinner the previous evening. It wasn't a riddle one could simply think through. In fact, even a merchant wouldn't be able to guess the answer.

Cole had quickly given up on it and gone to bed, but with her title of Wisewolf at stake it seemed that Holo had pondered over it long and hard. Of course she couldn't keep herself from acting in a manner that suggested, “If it was a riddle with great meaning, fine, but how foolish it was to spend all night struggling for the answer to an inconsequential one.”

Being unable to find the answer must have been enraging. Naturally, Lawrence knew that when she was in such a childish frame of mind, she'd purposely steal glances at him. She would get him to laugh at her displeasure and say "What, are you stumped?" before quickly revealing the answer. That was the way she usually solved such problems.

But Lawrence hadn't let her. In fact he wished she'd forget about it altogether, if at all possible. He was somewhat apprehensive about the answer. So despite feeling like he was being overly sensitive, and having accidentally avoided her glance the first time, he did so intentionally the second time. And the third. And the fourth.

Holo had grown visibly upset after going through such pains to dig out the answer. At this point, he couldn't even engineer one designed to make her laugh heartily - it would just make her angrier. It was more difficult to reveal it each time he avoided her glance, and now he'd have to keep it from her entirely. If only he'd known this would happen, he would've just blurted it out right away, but it was far too late for that.

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"That is basically the gist of it."

It was only the second time Holo had spoken to Lawrence that day, but the conversation was one-sided. She rambled on and on, mixing in only a few frustrated sighs, until she finally came to her conclusion. Cole listened to her speech, stunned, as he busily hung their traveling clothes on a suspended rope to dry.

After dinner, they'd only just noticed that she'd left the room for quite some time when she finally returned and immediately dove straight into the topic. No wonder Cole reacted the way he did. Lawrence was nothing short of impressed that her train of thought had managed to arrive at this conclusion.

"You're exactly right.."

"You foolish twit!"

He had no excuse, so he could only earnestly reply. For her part she also replied earnestly, with quite a scolding. Despite her anger, seeing him act so ridiculously seemed to burn out her rage quite quickly. The moment she sat down she asked Cole to bring her liquor, savagely bit the cork off, and drank it immediately.

"That odd behavior of yours just made me want to know the answer all the more. Who would have thought-"

"So you went and asked for the answer?"

It wasn't so long ago that Cole would have trembled at the slightest hint of Holo's anger, but now he was even brave enough to ask her such a question as she handed him the cork.

"Aye. I said that I had lost sleep trying to figure it out, and was ridiculed for it. Me! Holo the Wisewolf!"

"I was once taught in school that 'there are some things you will never know without asking'. So what was the answer?"

Hearing the boy say this while continuing his task of hanging their clothes, Holo didn't answer. Instead she turned her gaze to Lawrence, with a look saying "it is too much trouble, you explain it." In truth, she probably *was* too lazy to explain it. With distilled liquor in one hand, she ate some dried meat with the other.

"A person like Pisky is rare indeed, being used to traveling alone yet somehow still preparing meals for groups of people. He must be involved in establishing new towns or markets. Since he mentioned that he frequently lead the way for many people, he was probably referring to pioneers trying to begin a new life in a new land."

"So that's what it was.."

Even while listening to Lawrence with an impressed look on his face, Cole managed to finish his task with a practiced hand *and* check on their stove's condition. Their lodge didn't have fireplaces, nor was the air circulation ideal, so controlling a fire's strength would be difficult.

"Basically, those going on such journeys aren't accustomed to traveling. So one who couldn't properly equip them all or make quick decisions would have a very tough time with this job."

"In truth, from the perspective of one experienced with leading a pack, that male does indeed appear very reliable. He is straightforward, and a good speaker on top of that."

Holo's eyes were half-closed as she squinted directly at Lawrence, who coughed. Cole continued with a wry smile.

"Then Mr. Pisky has such an important job, huh.. but if that's the case.."

*Why was Mr. Lawrence trying to hide the answer from Miss Holo?* That question was boldly written in his eyes as he looked at Lawrence. It was an extremely embarrassing thing to admit that one had been so overly paranoid, but if Lawrence didn't accept his punishment then he wouldn't be able to earn Holo's forgiveness.

Of course he would no longer be able to retain the dignity to call himself an independent merchant if he immediately begged Holo's forgiveness every time something so silly came up. But right now, in this room that would be filled with smoke if they fed the fire too quickly,

anyone would want her tail to warm them at night. A merchant needed to be able to calculate profit and loss.

“Simply put, his job is helping immigrants. If that's being backed by a king or the aristocracy, it would be in order to seize control of lands. If it's being backed by the Church, it would be in order to spread their gospel. But no matter the reasons behind it, they still have the same results: once the immigrants arrive at their haven, if they're fortunate enough to settle there it will become their new home.”

“Ah..”

“It may be a difficult job, but it's potentially very profitable and will earn much thanks if successful. I've even heard that some doing this have become aristocrats themselves, on the request of the villagers or townspeople they helped. But among those who immigrate to a new land, many have lost their homes because of war, famine or disease. That's why-”

Lawrence turned his eyes to Holo.

“That's why, if possible, I wanted you to just let the riddle go.”

“Hmph.”

She turned away from him and flung some skin that hadn't been cleaned off her dried meat into the stove. The ashes in the stove swept up in response as Cole's eyes followed them, as though he was witnessing something marvelous.

“For us wolves, the concept of establishing a new home does not exist. A home is a home, regardless of who lives there. What matters is the land itself. Besides, you were most likely worried that I would say something like this right?”

On their journey, he and Holo had argued a countless number of times. She already knew his thought processes like the back of her hand.

“Please find a home for me as well, will you not?”

She had put on her coquettish manner and looked at him with upturned eyes. Unexpectedly, Cole actually watched the entire scene as it unfolded. Lawrence knew she was angry. But he also knew her anger was akin to a kitten holding out its paw, beckoning for someone to play with it.

“Males truly are dumb fools!”

“..I can say nothing to the contrary.”

“Seriously.”

She took a swig from her bottle after derisively getting in the last word. Lawrence looked on with a helpless expression and a palm on his forehead. So far, everything was playing out as usual. All that remained was for Cole to smile cheerfully and their ritual would be complete. But Holo's tail was swishing back and forth. They had to wake up early tomorrow as well.

“All of this anger has exhausted me. Good night.”

Her group leadership skills were impressive indeed.

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It was just after noon on the third day that they arrived at the Brondel Monastery. Perhaps it was a blessing that it had only snowed hard on the second day of their journey, but the fact that they weren't given a hard time during inspection and were able to enter the building's grounds might not be such a good thing after all.

The high walls surrounding the place were indeed stylistically appropriate for a monastery, but as soon as they went through the entryway the atmosphere given off by the interior was like a town inhabited solely by merchants.

“You, what would happen if you intentionally dropped some change on the ground?”

Given that Holo couldn't resist saying such a thing while on horseback, it went without saying just how thick that merchant atmosphere here was. If someone did drop some change it would catch everyone's attention like sneezing in a church.

“Maybe there really *isn't* anything that can't be bought here..”

Pisky spoke playfully as he rode parallel to them. Lawrence chuckled in reply, but got the feeling that maybe he wasn't entirely joking after all.

The center of the path had been partially cleared of snow, with mountainous heaps piled up on both sides. The air that surrounded them as a result was as cold as being in an icy underground vault. Even some patches of their horse's mane had frozen.

Merchants were everywhere in spite of the cold, each speaking enthusiastically about his business with his arms crossed. Not only that, they seemed to be genuinely having a good time, given how they tapped their feet from the cold like excited children.

“Well, please wait here for a moment while I go arrange your lodgings.”

“We're counting on you.”

Pisky first tied the horse they were riding to a public stable before hopping off his own horse

and half-running away. Mounting and dismounting a horse took some skill, especially when one's body was so stiff from the cold. Lawrence dismounted as well, then grabbed Holo and Cole and helped them off the horse.

After unloading their belongings from the sled, he expressed his gratitude to their driver for the safe journey. The horse remained as stoic and frozen as ever, but the man folded his arms across his chest in a polite gesture of farewell. He was the very image of a devout northerner.

“You know, this place is surprisingly big. Did you not say that this was only an annex of sorts?”

“My knowledge isn't exactly complete, so I really can't be sure either. But I do know that it's supposed to be a trading post where 'there's enough wool to fill the Winfield Strait.' Look! They even have stained glass windows over there.”

Indeed, on the top floor of an impressive three-story stone building were windows reflecting the blue-grey sky that occasionally cast a snowflake down upon them. Not all of the buildings here had glass windows, but they all gave off a sense of grandeur and seemed solid enough to shrug off a modest attack.

All five of those buildings were built on either side of the spacious road that led from the entrance. But they weren't alone. There were also public stables with sheds to feed the sheep behind them. As if the scale of this place wasn't already impressive enough, Pisky had also told them that there were several places just like it.

“Aye, 'tis quite an impressive feat indeed to build a place like this out here in the snow.”

Holo gazed forward with a confident smile on her face. This branch of the monastery was specifically for merchants. It might only be a branch some distance from the main monastery, but it certainly didn't have an appearance that would tarnish their reputation.

At the end of the road was a building even more breathtaking than the rest, so much so that it moved one's heart to reverence. Atop its steeple, which seemed to touch the heavens, was the Church's emblem. Beneath was a bell so enormous not even fourteen horses could move it.

That building was likely the holy sanctuary where merchants went to find inner peace. In fact, it probably *did* bring peace to their souls, even if the sense of weight it emanated seemed enough to crush a man.

“This reminds me of something I heard in school.”

“Hmm?”

“I heard the clerics of the north are better-suited for interrogating heretics.”

The implication of Cole's words was clear to Lawrence – they were interrogators who never showed mercy. Indeed, it was precisely because they dwelled out here that the bearded clergymen had the cold, heartless eyes of a hawk which made them seem well-adapted to the role of heresy interrogation.

“But that was a long time ago, was it not?”

Lawrence followed Holo's gaze and watched a monk with robes thicker than a sheep's coat, as he led a large group of merchants out of a building and enthusiastically chatted with them for a while. He had a rosy complexion and plump cheeks to go with his plump body. His form gave off no trace of humility, purity, or virtuous poverty.

“Indeed. These days even one such as yourself can visit here on a pilgrimage, after all.”

The expression that she revealed brimmed with confidence, with a smile that didn't seem quite genuine.

“..This worries me.”

As he watched the white breath rise from his mouth and surveyed his surroundings, he received a kick from Holo. He snapped back to reality and saw the fury in her eyes, quickly realizing that she'd misinterpreted him.

“Ah, I didn't mean you.. I'd already jumped ahead in my mind.”

Despite his explanation she was still eying him suspiciously, so he continued.

“I'm worried that there are too many people here.”

“Umm, do you mean..”

Cole suddenly interjected. He'd been glancing around for a while now with eyes full of wonderment. It seemed that he vaguely sensed what Lawrence was worried about.

“There's just too many people for a place this size. No matter how grand a place this is, merchants and monks don't know how to sleep in close quarters, and can't happily spend their nights together in cramped rooms.”

“Are you implying that lodgings for us may be unavailable?”

This place needed to have a place for negotiations, a place to store contracts, and a place to discuss the details of those contracts. Not only that, it also needed workers to manage those areas and maintain the buildings, not to mention cooks. Plus, if a merchant of high status was visiting they would surely have a substantial entourage.

Lawrence knew he wasn't just feeling pessimistic because of the bad weather. One's instincts were oddly prescient in a monastery before God, so his was probably dead on. They looked around nervously until they spotted Pisky half-running back to them from a small building. He cut straight to the chase as he neared them, just like any merchant who made his living with haste instead of careful negotiation.

"I'm terribly sorry. There's just too many people here, so I was unable to book a room for the three of you."

He had prepared himself for this, but Lawrence was still momentarily at a loss. Pisky continued.

"It's possible you'll have to sleep side by side with others in one of the larger rooms.."

He paused mid-sentence and turned to Holo. What would happen if a girl like her was present in a crowded room? It was like flinging a piece of meat to a pack of starving dogs.

"Another option is to find you a room without floorboards, where you could spend the night. But in such cold weather, it won't be much different from camping out. What a pain! I was told that a large number of people suddenly surged in here in the past two days."

"There's no room in the stables, either?"

"Even the storerooms for hay are full, since they're likely to be even warmer than a room this time of year. I don't think I even need to mention the storerooms for wool."

The concern resurfaced on Pisky's face as he tried to resolve this problem for Lawrence and company, like he was a traveler who had come across a collapsed bridge on his way. Lawrence couldn't help but see the earnest effort he was making for their sake, and not for business. No wonder Holo had given him such a positive evaluation.

Yet the situation wasn't going to change for the better just because Pisky was being earnest. They would at least need bedding if they were going to stay in a stone-built room without floorboards. Just as Lawrence was going to mention this, a commotion stirred up in the area around them. More precisely, voices were clamoring out from a particular direction.

"Oh! The White Army returns in victory!"

One of the chatting merchants had shouted out. Lawrence cast his sight in the direction of the entrance to see the source of the clamor, and he immediately understood. Countless sheep could be seen coming in, accompanied by a rumbling sound and soft tremors in the ground.

Not even a contingent of fully-equipped mercenaries could offer resistance against a flock of this magnitude. As they entered the wide open gates, spears and sheepdogs herded the sheep to their designated sheds behind the stables.

After a while, the bells that were so commonly heard on the fields became audible, and four shepherds finally walked in. They greeted the merchants they were familiar with, patted their dogs on the head, and gave their thanks to God for allowing their day's work to safely conclude.

Now *these* were folks who lived in virtuous poverty. And yet they still came across as dignified. As Lawrence watched them, his mind began to wander. Norah, whom they'd met a while ago, wouldn't have to suffer such hardship if she could find a job at a place like this.

"Your thoughts are written all over your face."

Holo's words pulled him back to reality. It was all too obvious who was the lamb and was the wolf, given how he cringed as he looked at her. But his pathetic reaction seemed to satisfy her, so rather than continuing her assault she spoke coolly.

"Fate truly does exist. This world is simply so complicated that not everything will go as one wishes."

"..Yeah, that's true."

Many of the situations that had happened on their journey seemed to corroborate her words, when he reflected on things. As they quietly spoke he sensed someone's gaze upon them, and raised his head. His eyes fell on the gates that the sheep had just passed through like a surging wave.

With the sheep already some distance inside, the gates were being closed. The atmosphere was beginning to calm down again. However, the shepherds remained by the gates, and Lawrence suspected that one of them, an elderly man, was watching him.

"The workroom? No, maybe the storage room at the far end of the hall? Or maybe.. huh?"

Pisky had still been struggling for a solution to their lodging crisis, but raised his head when Lawrence raised his. He stared at the shepherds for some time before suddenly slapping his palm.

"That's it! There might be some empty rooms in the shepherds' dormitory! I hear a lot of them aren't as busy in the winter.. I'll go ask them!"

He ran off. That one shepherd had gazed in their direction, but he might have simply been looking past them at the sanctuary. As Lawrence was about to convince himself that was the case, Holo shot a sudden glance at the shepherds.

"One of them kept staring in our direction just now."

"So I wasn't just imagining it."

Only Cole seemed surprised, shooting nervous glances every which way. In xenophobic towns and villages, residents tended to be openly hostile to visitors. But it didn't seem that the shepherd had eyed them with hostility.

“Maybe he just found your presence here unusual? After all, if I recall correctly this place doesn't have any nuns, even if a number of monasteries mix men and women.”

“Aye.. his was indeed a look of surprise.”

“You didn't accidentally reveal your ears or tail did you?”

Despite it being an obvious joke, she lowered her chin, narrowed her eyes, and spoke with a face full of displeasure.

“My ears and tail have been dangling in boredom beneath my robes. It is not as if anything exciting has been happening to make my heart race.”

“That's wonderful news. I prefer women with a delicate charm.”

His foot was immediately stomped as Cole turned his face away in silent laughter. Pisky seemed to have successfully negotiated something just as the curtain fell on their third-rate comedy. He was happily waving in their direction.

“Would you be alright with lodging in a shepherds' dormitory?”

“Would you prefer me to play a delicately charming girl right now?”

Lawrence naturally posed his question not out of concern about her ability to face the shepherds, but out of concern that it would spoil her mood. But her firm and casual answer made it clear that she was sincerely alright with this. After all, she wasn't a child anymore.

“Then that's probably our best option.”

He waved to Pisky as he said so. He then felt a tinge of surprise when he saw Pisky shaking hands with the same elderly shepherd they were talking about just moments ago.

It seemed that the shepherds of the Great Brondel Monastery, where legends circulated of a golden sheep, were about to share a period of cohabitation with the harvest-controlling Wisewolf of Yoitsu.

Perhaps the world *was* more peaceful than one would expect.

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“Huskins.”

Because of the noise of setting his baggage on the ground, Lawrence almost missed that utterance. When it dawned on him that the shepherd was introducing himself, he hastily extended his right hand.

“I’m Kraft Lawrence.”

“..”

Lawrence noticed that Huskins' palm was tough as a sheep's hoof as they shook hands by the doorway.

“And these two are Holo and Cole. The odd winds of fate have us traveling together.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Huskins said nothing as he shook hands with them. The only word he uttered from start to finish was his name. His hand was the color of snow mixed with hay, he had long eyebrows, and he wore a beard that grew almost down to his chest.

He had a solid build, neither hunched over nor too skinny. Beneath his wrinkled eyelids were two gray eyes staring deeply at the distant horizon. His manner seemed none too agile, yet it gave off a sense of reliability and reminded one of wild and aged sheep.

A plains-walking spreader of truth, a wizened shepherd; a number of labels seemed to aptly describe Huskins. Ultimately he was just that type of shepherd, a venerable man whose very being exuded those qualities.

“Thank you so much for your willing assistance.”

According to Pisky, the shepherds who lived with Huskins only visited home once every few years. As long as Lawrence and company were willing to do the cooking, he was willing to let them use the spare rooms. Of course it was hardly an inn, so the rooms didn't have separate fireplaces.. just one brick stove to share. Still, it was heaven compared to sleeping in a crowd of strangers or on a cold stone floor.



“I will tend the stove. Otherwise, you're free to use whatever you want.”

It was said that shepherds who led countless sheep day in and day out lived in such harsh conditions that they became more saintly than actual saints. Huskins seemed to fit this description better than anyone. Engaging him in conversation wouldn't likely elicit a response from the old shepherd.

Indeed, he probably had no desire to talk with anyone. Having passed that judgment, Lawrence nodded to him and said no more. After staring at the three of them silently for a moment, Huskins lightly nodded and made his way to the room with the stove.

“Is he a clergyman?”

As soon as Huskins' footsteps grew too quiet to hear, Cole immediately posed that question. It certainly wasn't a strange thing to ask, as Lawrence himself could picture seeking Huskins' wisdom in times of uncertainty.

“He's more like a worldly sage living out in the wild, wouldn't you say so?”

“Are you making fun of me?”

Holo stopped eating the pile of mountain berries as immediately as she had started, which was right after setting down her luggage. He glanced briefly in her direction and intentionally shrugged.

“We seem to have more leftovers than I expected. With this much, even if we count Huskins' portion we'll still have enough to last a while. And since there are merchants crawling around everywhere it shouldn't be too much of a problem even if we do start to run low.”

“True, but a while back I saw a large line in front of the well, so water might be the real issue.”

As expected of Cole; he was a keen observer. On a low-budget journey there was nothing more important than water. One could survive with barely any food for a week, but without water they wouldn't last long at all.

“Shall I go fetch some right away?”

“That might be for the best.. I'll leave it to you, then. We'll need water to cook, too, and we have to consider that the well may freeze up at night.”

“Alright!”

Cole seemed to be the type who felt more at ease as soon as he was given a task to complete. After spiritedly replying, he left into the outside cold with a bucket and a leather water-pouch. Lawrence felt compelled to say something seeing as how Holo had ignored the whole thing,

opting to leisurely devour the berries instead.

“Even just a short while ago I would've criticized you, even if I knew you'd scold me in turn.”

She didn't display her emotions, but in truth Holo also wanted to be useful. But because she didn't show it, she sometimes ended up forgetting to help out altogether.

“..It appears that you have improved somewhat.”

“I'd like to think I've been with you long enough for that.”

“Heh. Setting that aside, if we are forced to linger here long enough to worry about our food supplies, I will find it quite irksome.”

She tossed the last berry into her mouth and heaved herself up slightly.

“Yeah, that's true. If the snow starts piling up we might even get stuck here. If I had to be stuck somewhere I'd also rather it be a town.”

“That is one of my reasons, but there is another.”

“There's another?”

“Aye. You may find yourself buried alive in the wool of the sheep I will devour.”

“Please try your hardest so it doesn't come to that.”

He said it in jest, but he couldn't help but wonder if she was entirely joking. He'd only caught a remote glimpse of the herd, but the sheep did seem to have wool of fine quality. Fine wool was basically a guarantee of a sheep's deliciousness.

“Then again, any other traveler who got stuck here would have little to do but discuss rumors. But we want to gather information, so wouldn't it be ideal for us?”

“Not necessarily. Rumor can spread quickly enough to disadvantage both parties. What is important for us is determining how to quietly collect information about the bones, without calling attention to ourselves.”

Lawrence thought this over as he stroked the hair on his chin, which was starting to get shaggy. But they didn't really have many options, so he didn't have to think long. It was extremely difficult to keep other's lips sealed. Naturally, then, their only choice was to enlist the help of one who was trustworthy.

Only one person here fit that description. However, Lawrence couldn't help but hesitate when he thought about asking Pisky for help. Pisky was an exceptional character, to the point where

Lawrence didn't want to stand beside him in front of Holo.

"I fail to see a problem. A pack with two leaders often sees arguments between them, just like the bickering between two elders in a clan. There is no need to fret over such things."

She had nailed his concerns, just like that. But no matter how slow he was, it would be exceedingly difficult for Lawrence to admit that he was hesitating because he was worried she'd get along too well with Pisky.

Alas, staying silent now would just be playing into her hands. In the worst case she could even misconstrue his lack of confidence as a sign of mistrust. So he spoke as if ready to give his all in preparation for a negotiation of unprecedented scale.

"At this point, I care not who you grow closer to."

That sounded like a flawless declaration to his ears. Even Holo shouldn't be able to catch his lie, he felt. Yet she revealed an expression as if watching a white rabbit walk into a snare.

"Huh? Are you not the leader here?"

In an instant, her expression had changed to entirely different one.

"You are getting along well with that male while doing your best to not let your guard down, are you not? When one has just started leading a pack, it is common for them to try a bit too hard. It is not as though I fail to understand that.."

He reflected on her earlier words. Being intentionally imprecise with the subjects of her sentences was one of her greatest skills. On top of that, she had a perfect grasp of how people were inclined to interpret them.

"Here I have always viewed you as the leader, and yet this is what you are worried over? Not only do you count *me* as the leader, but you also hope that I will not transfer my affections to another?"

She smiled in complete satisfaction.

"You are such an adorable boy."

It had been ages since he was so embarrassed. He couldn't even groan. The irreverent way she lowered her head and nudged his hand with her chin, with her tail wagging all the while, made him want to ruthlessly pinch her cheeks, roll her up in a blanket, and throw her out the nearest window.

But if he lost his temper now, his shame would only be magnified and his punishment compounded, like throwing more coals on a raging fire. He convinced himself that surrendering

with just a hint of defiance was his best response, and simply raised the white flag like any good merchant ought to.

He then heard the rustling of fabric, and realized that she had turned over in bed. She was disappointed by his unexpectedly calm response.

“Hmph, acting like such a sensible male.”

He couldn't be a pushover in the face of such vicious words.

“It's easy to understand once I think back to my earlier days.”

“Hmm?”

He raised his index finger and held his other hand on his waist as if about to give a lecture.

“What's the most charming way to attract the attention of the one you love, and the most likely to win her heartfelt smile?”

She seemed dumbstruck.

“To intentionally look for trouble, thus having her notice you.”

“So I can't lose my temper over every little thing.”

He approached her bedside and pushed her nose down with his index finger. Of course he was leaving himself wide open for a comeback, knowing full-well that it would be trivial for her if she wished it. After all, he couldn't count the number of times he figured he had her cornered, only to end up being the one who was bitten. That's why he was always ready for his finger to be bitten.

This time, however, she seemed to be enjoying his little routine. He patiently awaited a counterattack, and only ended up watching her lying there and gazing back up at him. After some time passed had passed, she spoke - and with her nose still being pressed under his finger, her voice was slightly nasally.

“After all, we all have our preferences.”

Her meaning was that people didn't always prefer what was best. In other words, someone like Pisky wasn't necessarily going to be the target of her affection. It was her way of surrendering, carefully crafted to avoid flattering him in the slightest.

“I- I'll just take that as a compliment.”

Words couldn't express how frustrated he was for stuttering at the most crucial time. Her

majesty the Wisewolf, on the other hand, seemed especially pleased.

“Hnn-hnn.”

She let out a nasally laugh. Shortly after that Cole returned with the water, completely out of breath.

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They weren't trying to conceal their identities, but Lawrence and his companions still waited for the sky to darken and the sun to begin setting before they entered the sanctuary. Even if they lit a candle, it would have still seemed darker than a pitch-black night.

Since it was snowing, the normally-unpleasant act of sitting in the pews to pray was far more attractive. The monastery typically began and ended its days hours before a regular person would, so the evening mass was long over and the only other person in the sacred hall besides them and Pisky was the attending monk.

The man held a worn leather pouch that was nonetheless made of sheepskin of the finest quality. After they had concluded their prayers, he immediately approached them and silently opened it. Pisky and Lawrence dropped in a few foreign silver coins from the mainland.

“May the Lord grant you His blessing.”

After coldly uttering that one line, he turned and left. Lawrence knew he likely had to hurry and light the candles for a late night ritual, but he still couldn't help feeling that kind of attitude wasn't going to win them any devout followers.

“It's about time.”

Pisky spoke in a hushed voice, and the words that left his mouth dispersed in wisps of white breath. It was intensely cold, and on top of that it was the time one would normally be eating, drinking and making merry. But unlike them, Pisky had friends here. This was his busiest time of day. Cole was still silently praying, accompanied by Holo. Lawrence nodded at Pisky and nudged their shoulders. The two of them rose from the pew in unison.

One could gain a deep sense of the grandeur of this place by simply looking up at the ceiling, from the door to the altar. The fortune invested in this place over the years was plainly visible, and enough to grant it a sense of stately divinity. Even the embroidered screen draped from the ceiling, though faded from candle smoke and the cold climate, would unveil a world of gold once gently pulled aside.

“The Great Brondel Monastery.. the dwelling place of our almighty God..”

Cole looked back and murmured that after they had walked through the winding corridors and past a large set of doors, which seemed solid enough to withstand the assault of a battering ram. Though he might be branded a pagan by the Church, he didn't harbor much dislike toward it.

Lawrence couldn't tell if the boy had temporarily abandoned his trifling values as he marveled at the divine atmosphere of this impressive place built in the land of dancing snowflakes. Perhaps he was simply fond of that poem.

Holo would have normally made fun of him, but not even she could bring herself to tug on his hand this time. She paused with him and looked back for quite some time before they caught back up with Pisky and Lawrence.

“If possible, I'd love to invite the three of you to participate as well..”

“You're being too polite. I can understand your situation. If you were going to a business negotiation, on the other hand, then you couldn't stop me from tagging along.”

“Haha! Thanks for your understanding. Then, I'll see you tomorrow!”

“Alright, I hope the banquet's delightful!”

Having parted ways with Pisky by the torch-lit entrance of the sanctuary, they now directed their footsteps toward the shepherds' dormitory. It was late and there wasn't a soul on the path, even here just outside the sanctuary. There was only the light being offered by the torches high above them.

“It is sure to be a wonderfully cheerful banquet.”

Although they hadn't been inside the sanctuary for very long, the stone steps of the dormitory were already buried under a thick layer of snow.

“He had excellent wine in that leather pouch, too.”

“A delightful banquet refers to one with dishes as fine as the wine, and companions finer still.”

“Just what are you trying to say..”

At first he instinctively suspected that she was implying *he* wasn't a fine drinking companion, but considering what had happened earlier he soon realized that wasn't her intent at all.

“Just don't go saying things like that during dinner tonight, you hear me?”

A heavy sigh was heard from under her hood, and she stomped her feet.

“But how is one to enjoy a drink around someone so gloomy and filthy? Discounting the fact that he cannot seem to greet anyone properly, just as I wondered where he had disappeared to, he had the *gall* to show up the very next instant with raw mutton! What was he playing at, putting it on display like that next to the stove? Was he *intentionally* trying to provoke me!?”

Shepherds had to leave early in the morning, and didn't return until late in the evening. So aside from dinner, they ate their meals outdoors. This being a region that received a lot of snow, a shepherd might be forced to spend the night indoors. He certainly wouldn't keep his sheep at the dormitory, but preparing food for his companions was one of a shepherd's jobs.

Instead of saying that Huskins had a cold demeanor because he lacked social graces, it made more sense to say his need to prepare for the upcoming day meant that he didn't have the luxury to engage in polite conversation. It probably wasn't his personality that got to Holo, though. It was him drying mutton right in front of her. He'd even strung up mutton sausages next to the leather rope that was drying the rest of the mutton.

“There's still some mutton jerky in the bag, isn't there?”

“Such hard-textured meat does not agree with me.”

She turned her face away in displeasure. Her behavior was even making him wonder if she wanted him to punish her for acting like a petulant child.. but he knew that she'd be better-prepared than this if she *really* wanted to press him into buying her dinner. She was only half-heartedly trying to win some of Huskins' tasty-looking mutton, and only because it happened to cross her path.

“If we just boil it in a pot the way Pisky did, it'll probably get nice and tender.”

She lifted her face and pouted at him as though her hopes were being dashed.

“Perhaps *you* should begin using a pot for a pillow from now on.”

He breathed a weary sigh.

“Are you saying you *want* my head to get even more tender?”

She locked her eyes forward without replying. Interacting this way, the three of them returned to the dormitory to hear soft laughter and breathe the scent of food from every room. The air was filled with the smell of cooked mutton, so it wasn't just Holo that was licking her lips in anticipation.

All of the doors were decayed to the point that a casual kick could put a hole through them. Holo spied mischievously into each room as they passed by, hoping to see what they were eating. Of the five rooms, they were lodged in one of the ones on the second floor.

Fifteen shepherds lived here, and they had even built a kennel for their dogs. If one counted the farms dotting this expansive region, they could easily deduce there were at least thirty shepherds in total. Lawrence had heard that some of them alternated between living in the dorms and on the farms, which meant that they didn't all know each other.

Huskins was one of the oldest shepherds. The locals said that when it came to sheep-related matters he possessed knowledge even beyond that of the gods.

“We’re back.”

It was very common for travelers to lodge in other's homes. But for one's stay to be pleasant, it was necessary to take the initiative and greet the others warmly whenever possible.

“The holy sanctuary here truly is an impressive sight.”

Huskins only nodded slightly in response, and continued cleaning the tendons and fat from the raw mutton in silence. Holo's newfound look of displeasure was likely due to disagreeing that he had to remove that precious fat.

After walking Holo and Cole back to their room Lawrence began making preparations for their dinner, since the sole condition they had been given for lodging here was to take care of Huskins’ meals. Just as he was lifting up one of the pots, Huskins suddenly opened his mouth to speak.

“..Quite a suitable place for an almighty God to dwell.”

Lawrence smiled and nodded, realizing that he was still referring to the holy sanctuary. After borrowing some of Huskins’ tools to form a support for the pot, Lawrence filled it with water and ingredients in the proportions taught to him by Pisky.

Holo preferred a heavier flavor, so Lawrence added in extra salt. It should be fine, since he'd also heard that shepherds, like their sheep, also preferred their food to be salty. He then added a large number of the hard, dry strips of meat and the bread that had been crushed in their baggage. He was gradually stewing up a highly nutritious meal.

This would have normally been a great opportunity to indulge in idle conversation, but Huskins continued to work in silence. Someone once said that it seemed that those who had spent most of their lives as shepherds only spoke with animals – Lawrence now understood how that person felt.

“Dinner's ready.”

When he moved to the adjacent room to call Holo and Cole, he discovered they had plucked

out a few strands of hay from the bed and were happily engaged in a childish game of “guess the shortest straw.” Judging from the wide grin on his face, Cole was probably winning.

As Lawrence brushed past Holo and patted her on the head, she leaned into him in a visibly coquettish manner. She didn't seem to be in a good mood.

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“We thank thee, Lord, for our daily bread.”

Before dinner the three of them recited the appropriate prayer from the Bible - something they normally never did. Cole was all smiles as he dug right in, but Holo's face twisted into a bitter expression befitting a true nun.

She was probably reacting that way because their soup had dried mutton, not the fresh kind, and perhaps even more importantly: a hot soup like this didn't go well at all with the distilled grape wine they were drinking.

While that may have been a problem on their way here, she couldn't very well get drunk at the monastery. Lawrence was sure he'd hear her whimpering soon, but alas there was nothing he could do about it. After all, seated before them was the hermit-like Huskins.

To get a better grasp of the situation, Lawrence decided it would be best for them to put on the semblance of being devout travelers. Their only friend here was Pisky, at best. The monastery was practically being taken over by the Ruvik Alliance; Lawrence wasn't even sure the name of the Rowen Trading Guild had any value here.

Despite Huskins being a mere shepherd, they were blessed with the opportunity to lodge with someone who spent most of his time on the monastery grounds. It was only natural to try to take advantage of that blessing. But like the lid on a jug of water, the man's lips were tacitly sealing the knowledge in his brain. The trick would be to lift that lid.

As expected he dined in complete silence, expressing neither gratitude nor criticism. Given that he had asked Lawrence's party to provide his meals, that could be counted as wise: criticizing the taste would likely only result in a conflict.

The problem was that it gave Lawrence no way to lift that lid on his mind. He had no choice but to bide his time and wait for an opportunity to present itself. As he ate, he pondered how to do that until Huskins slowly rose.

The pot was already close to empty, and all that remained was divvying up the remaining broth. Holo's lips curled upward, not even trying to conceal a greedy smile that practically shouted, “one less person to share it with!” But it was wiped from her face as he sat back down.. until he smoothly tossed in a piece of mutton that had been hanging from the leather rope.

“..Sharing a meal with a group like this ain't so bad once in a while.”

His voice was barely more audible than ashes collapsing in a fire, but to his guests - who had often had to eat alone – those words were warmer than any greeting. Holo's mood even seemed to take a turn for the better, and she was already scooping at the mutton that hadn't even had a chance to stew yet.

Lawrence turned to thank Huskins, only to see the old man pointing a small bottle at him. If the white liquid that dripped along the neck of that bottle was any indication, it was some form of liquor brewed with sheep's milk. He thankfully drank the wine in his own cup at once so Huskins could pour some of that liquor for him.

“Now that's a nostalgic taste.”

It was the type of liquor that one either loved or despised, and Lawrence belonged to the latter category. But he understood quite well that this was an offer of friendship from Huskins, at least for the time they were gathered here. Lawrence dramatized his appreciative expression, despite knowing that Holo was probably having a good chuckle at him.

“Mr. Huskins, have you..”

Lawrence pretended to blurt out under the alcohol's influence, then paused for a moment to observe Huskins' reaction. Huskins sliced off a bit of the now-cooked mutton and took a bite, then took a sip from his cup and looked at Lawrence.

“Have you always lived here, Mr. Huskins?”

“..I've been here for a few decades now, since the time of the last abbot.”

“I see. I've been traveling since I was a kid, living the business life. Sometimes I've lived in the same region for a while, but I still can't say I know what it must be like.”

Lawrence continued when Huskins said nothing, sensing that he was listening.

“Oh, that's right.. I remember hearing that three things never change in the Winfield Kingdom.. how did it go? Just how much truth is there behind that saying, would you say?”

Huskins was working at the mutton in his bowl with a knife, but stopped moving when he heard Lawrence say that. His eyes trailed off into the distance like anyone's would as they searched their memories for an answer.

“..Arrogant aristocrats, beautiful plains and..”

“And huge flocks of sheep!”

A faint smile seemed to spread on Huskins' face as Lawrence finished the sentence for him.

“..This place truly hasn't changed.”

“Sure sounds wonderful.”

“..Do you really think so?”

Huskins let his voice clearly ring out, as if he'd seen through Lawrence's attempts at flattery from the start. Holo was probably subtly peering at them from under her hood as she ate large mouthfuls of mutton. Her manner was a sure sign that Huskins had indeed seen through him, but Lawrence neither panicked nor cowered. He was a merchant with a great deal of experience.

“Indeed. Take me, for example. When I come back to a place after a year on business, I'll always tell others with a smile-”

He maintained the smile on his face as he continued.

“It's good to see this place hasn't changed.”

“..”

The animal-and-humanlike gray eyes under those long brows then turned to Lawrence. It was the first time Huskins had really taken a good look at Lawrence, and it was quite a powerful stare. The old shepherd then raised his cup of sheep's milk liquor for a drink, and nodded. The only sound at the table was the bubbling of the pot.

“..This place sure hasn't changed, and it won't change in the future either.”

“I'd expect that, since this is the Brondel Monastery after all.”

Again Huskins nodded, then silently poured some more liquor for Lawrence and nodded once more. It seemed Lawrence may have managed to get on his good side. Lawrence couldn't help but wish he had good-tasting wine instead, to make this moment a perfect one.

“But even a stone wall changes from day to day.”

“..You mean those merchants? Are you saying you guys are different from them?”

This probing manner of speech was quite unique to the Winfield Kingdom. Lawrence downed his liquor in one gulp and revealed a somewhat troubled smile.

“I'm indeed a merchant, but my purpose here is a bit different from the others.”

“..Oh? Coming to such an isolated place, and bringing children of God with you, no less..”

“We're here on pilgrimage, having heard a rumor about a certain holy relic at the Brondel Monastery.”

Lawrence intentionally didn't single out the wolf deity's bones. A huge monastery like Brondel was bound to have a couple such relics, with pilgrims making trips for that very reason. Huskins expressed some surprise, but quickly accepted Lawrence's explanation. He murmured something indistinctly, as if the words were trapped in his mouth, then nodded.

“..This uninteresting world shows its colors when people travel for different, varied reasons.”

His words would have seemed pretentious coming from the lips of a minstrel, but from his they sounded like a great truth. Lawrence smiled and nodded, helping Huskins to an extra-large portion of the rich soup that remained in the pot.

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Huskins left before daybreak the next morning. It was probably his usual schedule, if the spirited barking of the sheepdogs and conversation among the shepherds was any indication. Lawrence was shivering from the frigid air that seeped its way under the cover, making him cling onto Holo's ever-reliable tail.

He decided to indulge in the warmth a little longer. But a considerable amount of time passed before he woke up for the second time. The sun was already high in the sky, its rays sneaking in through the window seams.

He was considering just how lax he had grown, having done no business in quite some time, when he figured out why he slept so soundly. It was delightfully warm under the covers. Holo had slept next to him all night, and kept him warm.

“I sure am reliable.”

Any man should be happy to wake up lying next to a beautiful maiden, but it was a different story when there was a strip of jerky in her mouth. And especially if her breath also stank of alcohol.

Naturally, he knew that she had only done so to avoid having fingers pointed at her, having drunk herself to sleep next to the stove all alone. So since she preferred to sleep all curled up anyway, she decided to curl up here instead. Even Lawrence hated drinking alone, but the simplest answer was usually the correct one – it was warmest for her to hide under the covers.

“..Cole?”

“I do not know. The little fellow busied himself at the stove for a time, then followed that shepherd when the sun rose. To where, I know not.”

As she spoke, the bit of jerky hanging from her mouth gently shook. Lawrence could tell from its color that it was the same mutton Huskins was drying the night before. But he was too tired to chastize Holo, so he just prayed that Huskins wouldn't notice.

“Then the weather outside must've cleared up.”

Being trapped indoors during bad winter weather was common, and the day the weather improved there were always more people standing around outside, chatting excitedly.

“Aye. One of those sheepdogs was still running around outside only a little while back. But it seems to me that someone in here has been cuddling me like a little puppy.”

“It's certainly warmer than drinking liquor this early in the morning. Alright, let me pass already. I have to go gather information.”

He patted her shoulder but she refused to budge, so he sighed and crawled over her instead. The sun had been up for quite a while now, but that didn't make it any less cold to leave the covers. As much as he'd prefer returning to bed, where Holo waited with jerky in her mouth, he knew it was the devil tempting him. He opened the wooden window completely, and the sunlight reflecting off the snow instantly shot into his eyes, blurring his vision.

“..Whew. My, what an incredible view.”

“Tis cold.”

“Seeing the sea made you want to run on it, so doesn't this wide expanse of snow make you want to do so as well? Ah, so Cole's been playing with the sheepdogs on the other side.”

The animal farm was just beyond the well, and past the slightly-inclined central courtyard. A young boy was playing around there with several dogs, letting them playfully pounce on him. It was none other than Cole. Suddenly, it then dawned on him that Holo couldn't possibly play around with the sheepdogs like Cole could. Holo perceived his silent chuckle and threw him a suspicious glare.

“Well, he'll be back in a little while with the color drained from his lips. You can make fun of him to your heart's content when he does.”

“..”

Her face seemed disinterested, but her wagging tail was a clear indication that she didn't dislike the notion. Lawrence entered the next room to discover that the stove still had firewood inside

it. Cole hadn't been lax in his duties. In fact, there was still water in the pail. His performance was impeccable.

Lawrence eyed the drying mutton and saw that it had darkened substantially overnight. He choked down some dry oat bread with some water, then spent some time tidying his facial hair. He knew she wouldn't follow, but he still asked Holo a useless question.

“Would you like to come with me?”

Naturally, he meant “come with me to gather information about the bones.” After all, she was the one who proposed this search in the first place. As expected, she remained prone on the bed, swishing her tail to and fro with no further reply.

“Then take your time and enjoy yourself.”

As he closed the door behind him, he realized that he'd subconsciously upped the pitch at the end of his sentence and wondered if Holo had noticed it as well. A large number of merchants were gathered here under the banner of the Ruvik Alliance. He was bound to come across a lot of information other than news about the wolf deity's bones.

It was cold, but the sun's bright reflection off the snow made it seem even brighter than the summertime. He shielded the confident smile on his face with both hands as he went outside, and strode off.

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“Asseus' madder, Eroll's woad, Vito's oak, and Richter's saffron.”

“Richter's saffron is high quality. I hear master Milone wore a beautiful yellow costume at the last banquet he attended.”

“You mean that banquet that shocked even the archbishop of Mira? Thanks to that one, one of my aristocrat regulars bought a bunch of my merchandise and earned me a tidy profit.”

“Oh? I'm envious. But if you need to restock, my shipment of spices should be arriving soon. How about ordering some? They're from a variety of places..”

Without any context, someone listening to the discussions on either side of the road here would be completely lost. Merchant's friends were also merchants. If someone did business here, they could probably buy any piece of merchandise in the world. What merchant wouldn't be moved to joy to be in such a place?

Unlike the others, he was just a poor merchant and had no knowledge of commonly-known expensive goods. But he was confident about his knowledge of unique and obscure rural

products. Should he join those merchants over there? No! The ones over here seemed better after all.

He somehow managed to resist the many temptations and found himself at a building with a green flag hanging above its entrance, bearing the moon and shield insignia of the Ruvik Alliance – one of the inns designated for their use.

“There’s no need to knock.”

A group of merchants were holding a spirited conversation about some ironsmith's shop, when one of them shouted out to Lawrence as he lifted up his hand. Lawrence smiled and nodded in acknowledgment, to which all of the merchants raised their hats slightly and smiled back.

“This place really is like paradise for merchants.”

He couldn't help but murmur this as he opened the door.

“Excuse me, is Mr. Pisky here?”

“Hmm.. Pisky? Oh, you mean Lago. He’s inside writing, over there.”

“My thanks.”

There was always a recreation hall set up on the first floor of foreign firms and inns. Having expressed his thanks, Lawrence made his way to that end of the building. There were twenty-some tables there, with people playing cards, holding discussions around maps, or weighing coins on scales.

Pisky seemed dead set on whatever he was writing, his hand furiously moving around the table. Lawrence hesitated to disturb him, but Pisky was an experienced traveling merchant with instincts sharp enough to notice mercenaries lying in ambush two hilltops away. He lifted his eyes, saw it was Lawrence, and faintly smiled.

“Good morning, Mr. Lawrence. Did you sleep well last night?”

“Yes, thanks to you. I wish I could say that tonight will be the same.”

“Oh my. Why's that?”

Pisky acted in response, playing along with Lawrence's affected intonation. He was indeed an impressive young man. Lawrence pointed up at his eyes, thinking that there was much to learn from him.

“I've never seen a bespectacled traveling merchant. I just might be kept up all night in envy.”

“Oh, you mean these? Hahaha! Well, this *is* a monastery in the land of writing. Many no-longer-needed pairs can be found lying around here.. these aren't my own.”

The making of glass was difficult enough, but forming it into a lens truly required the skills of an accomplished glassmaker. Spectacles were a rare and expensive commodity, but for monks whose job it was to constantly transcribe the fine strokes and intricate lines of ornamental letters, they were practically a necessity.

“So what important business brings you here? Ah, please, have a seat.”

Lawrence noticed a limestone tablet on the table, with the names and quantities of many products chiseled into it. Pisky seemed to be writing up a manifest of the items he needed to purchase and transport here for his next visit.

“A lone businessman needs only to remember the products he must procure. But one in an organization needs to keep clear records of their purchases.”

“Well, written records are more accurate than memory, as the saying goes. That, and once you've joined an organization you'll end up recorded in the Church's burial records when you die, and not just etched in the memories of your companions.”

“Eeeexactly. Ah, praise the Lord for his blessing.”

Pisky dabbed his quill pen into an inkwell, Then continued writing with a smile.

“I beg your pardon for writing while I talk. I take it you're here to find out what our situation is?”

“..Is it really alright for you to say it out loud like that?”

“Hahaha! Rest assured, everyone here knows everyone else, so outsiders are always under surveillance.”

Lawrence refrained from looking around foolishly, and just maintained the smile on his face. The smile on Pisky's face remained as he cast a surprisingly acute stare in Lawrence's direction.

“Your ticket here was Mr. Deutschmann's trust, so rest easy. I'm even tempted to ask just what information you gave that won him over.. but that's probably a trade secret, isn't it?”

His smile became a mischievous one. In turn, a natural smile surfaced on Lawrence's face, as he reminded himself to not let his guard down.

“Alas, that is the case.”

“Then I'll stop troubling you about it. In any case, our opponent currently seems unwilling to

give in, even as they cling to a fortress that's logically on the verge of collapse. Our extensive efforts seem to have left them sore, so they're taking a slight break."

"..They're still holding on, despite being attacked on all sides?"

"We've already attempted numerous direct negotiations, apparently to no avail. Because of that I hear we've begun trying to win over the abbot, after trying to win over the abbot of their sister monastery and even their archivist. A lot of merchants are here, after all, so it's possible one of them's a close friend or associate of theirs. But they've stubbornly rejected all negotiations, though they're obviously in dire straits.. you seriously can't help but feel *some* respect for people like that."

Pisky's tone seemed sincere rather than mocking. The fact that they'd weathered the alliance's attacks thus far probably would seem miraculous to someone in the alliance.

"So.. exactly what kind of information do you seek from me, Mr. Lawrence?"

A frank smile was on Pisky's face, but Lawrence was no pushover - he usually interacted with a master of verbal chicanery, Holo. His composure remained in the face of Pisky's surprise attack as he formulated his reply.

Ultimately, though, he chose not to play dumb, and turned away instead. Acting tough now would do him no good. After all, this place had the flag of the Ruvik Alliance over it. Cleverly manipulating Pisky to his own ends would be the act of an insolent brat, not an outstanding merchant.

"To be honest, what I seek is something too embarrassing to say out loud here."

"Most of the topics spoken on these hallowed grounds are too embarrassing for the ears, so please don't hesitate to speak."

Pisky's invitational manner was practically identical to that of a priest receiving a confession.

"You truly think so?"

"Yes. Besides, I take great interest in this matter. You don't appear to be here to see our sorry state. I'd guessed that you were coming here to meet someone, and yet you came to see me instead of a monk. As worthless as I am, I'm still a traveling merchant, and I don't ignore my own boundless curiosity. If I spot a sliding curtain, I can't help but want to know what lies behind it."

Lawrence caught himself thinking about what a pleasure it would be to do business with Pisky. Not many people inspired that feeling in him. He was suddenly tempted to continue their tug-of-war, but he knew that this was the crucial moment to pull the rope and win. He suppressed a

tinge of regret and intentionally put on a sheepish smile.

“My question is, what chance is there for ones like us to see the holy relics?”

All the expression on Pisky's face instantly melted. He then began to stroke his face, while looking like someone staring into the face of disaster.

“I.. beg your pardon. Haha! Apparently I still haven't had sufficient training. I *never* expected such a reason.”

“Then you don't find my reason suspicious?”

“Please stop teasing me. This is one of the branches of the Great Brondel Monastery. I'd be damned by the heavens above if I showed any more surprise that someone came here to see the holy relics rather than make a profit.”

Pisky laughed a little before looking at the tip of his pen, only to see that the ink on it had almost dried. He dipped the pen into the inkwell and resumed his writing.

“I really thought you'd come here for a different purpose..”

“A different purpose?”

“Oh, it's nothing. But after hearing you, it strikes me that you're being honest. You're definitely not the type that one should let their guard down around. If you've gone out of your way to come here with Mr. Deutschmann's introduction, you're surely hoping to see a list of our would-be acquisitions, is that it?”

That's what Lawrence had revealed to Holo and Cole, when they were lodged at the inn by the harbor. He'd predicted that if the Ruvik Alliance was planning to buy the monastery's land, they must have conducted a thorough investigation of what they owned.

That conjecture may have been putting the cart before the horse, but naturally Lawrence had no need to humble himself and reveal that much in full honesty. So he neither nodded nor shook his head, and simply smiled.

“This monastery's name is known throughout the world. I've heard it possesses much, including holy relics. Of course I don't have detailed information on each of those relics, but.. what kind of relics are you after? I just might be able to help you out.”

Lawrence's next response had to be very carefully considered. He decided to drop an indirect answer as a precaution.

“It's a holy relic related to the Golden Sheep.”

“The Golden Sheep..”

When a clever merchant repeated another's words, they were guaranteed to be thinking about them at the same time. In the brief moment that stall tactic created, they could imagine a hundred possible scenarios. But even having bought himself that extra time, Pisky wasn't able to come up with a proper response.

His smile became the same kind that spread on Cole's face whenever he'd been teased by Holo. The merchants eavesdropping on their conversation were probably secretly shaking their heads and inwardly sighing at that response.

“If it's something left behind by a saint, I'm aware of a few such items.. but if it's the Golden Sheep then I'm afraid-”

“That it's mostly likely a baseless rumor?”

“Well, I wouldn't completely write it off.”

Pisky gazed at the merchants at the next table as he spoke. The two of them perceived this, having overheard everything despite playing cards, and only gave a light shrug.

“The legend of the Golden Sheep's been circulated in the monastery for centuries, so you can put it another way..”

“That no one's actually *found* the Golden Sheep in all those centuries?”

“That's really the best I can offer.”

Pisky's face was full of regret. He seemed reluctant to smile at Lawrence in disdain, knowing he'd been apparently led here by a baseless rumor. Since the other party was now biased in that way, Lawrence had no reason to keep struggling.

But he couldn't let their evaluation of him get too negative, lest it become an obstacle to gathering information in the future. Being humble and being looked down upon were two very different things. And so, Lawrence needed to do some damage control.

“In all honesty, I'd already been told many times before coming here that what I'm after is just a baseless tale. But it isn't just insignificant merchants like me who go out in search of their dreams – even those great figures who perpetually stare at ledgers wish for that from time to time. That's how I got the chance to become acquainted with Mr. Deutschmann.”

“..Meaning?”

“After discovering what I was after, the one who introduced me to Mr. Deutschmann had his curiosity piqued. He wasn't able to free himself of his obligations, so he sent me to chase his

dream for him. The more composed one is, the more open his mind is to the things that interest him.”

The trick to confidently telling a lie was to base it off of facts and give it just the right amount of detail. The two men playing cards behind Pisky nodded as if saying “so that's how it was.” If a merchant stopped chasing after money to chase after a ridiculous dream instead, they'd be seen as impractical fools. But if they did so for the sport of a wealthy man, it wasn't nearly as foolish. Pisky calmly saw it the same way.

“So that’s how it was.”

“..And now you've learned another way to get on a rich man's good side?”

“No no, I'm being completely serious.”

It only made Lawrence happier to see the wry smile on Pisky's face. He'd been able to retain a positive evaluation that was neither too low nor too high. Better still, it painted him as a harmless merchant, here on a curious whim. And so, Lawrence boldly leaned forward and spoke.

“It's for this reason that I'm here to gather all the information I can about the Golden Sheep. Is there anyone else around here who might have more information about it?”

Any merchant who shunned the fancies of a rich man didn't have the right to call himself a merchant. So one by one, with cups of wine in their hands and smiles on their faces, the other merchants who'd been listening in began to gather around Lawrence.

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Lawrence made no mention of the wolf deity's bones, but only because mentioning the Golden Sheep was enough – wolves and sheep were always related. If there was a holy relic related to the Golden Sheep, he could find out more about the bones by following that trail. Even if he didn't gain anything specific about the bones, he'd at least sniff out a few clues.

That was his original hope, but ultimately he gathered far less information than he'd anticipated. Worse, this was the kind of topic that was well-suited for lively conversations accompanied by liquor. By the time he finally managed to pull himself away and return to his room, he was already so drunk he couldn't walk straight.

His body collapsed face-down on the bed before Holo could stop leisurely grooming her tail and move out of his way. As she struggled to free herself from under his arm, Cole hurriedly fetched him some water.

“You sure have it good.”

Those were her words, having finally freed herself with a mighty effort.

“Are you really one to talk?”

He took the bowl Cole handed to him and drank it while lying down in bed. If he couldn't even manage that much, he would never have been able to stay in cheap inns with other people. He handed the bowl back to Cole after draining it. He knew that if he closed his eyes now, he would immediately nod off.

“So, how much information did you gather?”

She stared at him narrowly as she pulled his ear. He might have gotten upset if he was sober, but since he was now using her carefully-groomed and fluffed tail as a cushion, he knew she also had a good reason to be upset.

“You mean 'did I have a good time at the banquet?' Surely you can tell, can't you?”

“Harumph! If you had dared to say you had a good time, I would have chewed your ears off.”

“Had I known it would turn out like this I would have forced you to join me.. I'm sorry I'm so late that her majesty the Wisewolf has had to begin leisurely drinking on her own..”

He no longer had any control over his liquor-addled mind, and his sarcasm only earned him a slap in the face. Truthfully, had she joined him it would have made things even harder. She'd probably realized that and deliberately chosen to stay behind. After her whip-like slap she gently pulled his cheek.

“Have you anything else to say?”

Her assault was actually quite pleasing to his already-numb face. He closed his eyes at the pleasant sensation on his cheek and replied.

“Let me get some sleep first..”

“Foolish mule. However, unlike you, I am one who knows how to show gratitude.”

As his consciousness faded, he swore he could feel the comforting touch of a hand stroking his cheek.

Although he was sure that his memory hadn't lapsed, when he finally reopened his eyes it was no longer dusk, but was pitch black around him. He'd woken up abruptly, and was still unable to get up with any speed.

He suspected that he'd drifted off in the exact same position he was in as soon as Holo stroked

his cheek. He didn't even try turning his head; he knew it would be too painful. He closed his eyes in regret at having slept in such a terrible way, then lifted himself straight up.

His body was as stiff as soil bereft of moisture. His only solace was having remembered to cover himself in a blanket before nodding off. No, wait, it wasn't a blanket..

When he sat up he discovered some brownish animal fur stuck to his clothing. Holo must have kept her tail on him the entire time. Her sweet fragrance stimulated him as he brushed away her fur.

“Nng..”

As he sat up he pressed a hand against his neck, which had apparently managed to miss his pillow when he landed in bed. As he did, the thin and vaguely-illuminated door to their room slowly opened. Because of the drink, even the dim light from the stove was too intense for his eyes.

“Are you awake?”

“..I suppose so.”

“Dinner is still hot. Will you eat?”

“..I need water.”

She shrugged rather than replying, and handed him a jug of water.

“What about Cole?”

“He is being lectured by that shepherd on the things one needs to know to survive days of snow, and is listening passionately. Unlike me, that young one is good at asking questions.”

Rays of light crept in through the cracks of the door. Her confident smile was quite fearsome in these conditions. Because Cole was so good with his questions, Lawrence would often proudly lose himself in their conversations, and in the process neglect her. It seemed she was somehow even less happy about that than he thought. Judging by how she stared down at him, unwilling to sit beside him, he was probably right.

“It seems I'll have to find someone to lecture me on what one needs to know in order to survive your scoldings.”

“Do you mean you plan on asking someone other than I?”

“I can only ask you when you aren't angry.. otherwise you're a completely different person.”

“Hmph. My current form is only temporary, you know.”

She revealed a kind smile as she spoke. Lawrence couldn't help but fear this wolf.

“So.. how did it go?”

The two of them whispered as though speaking into each other's ears, knowing that only a thin door separated them from the hall. Given how much like pillow-talk it was, the not-quite-sober Lawrence felt his lips curl up into a smile.

But that smile came into being for another, more important reason. When she saw him stumble back to their room in the inn, she hadn't seized him by the collars and demanded his report immediately. Despite desperately wanting to know the results of his investigation, she had showed consideration.

But that fact only made the smile on his face gradually turn into one of resignation. He could only report that his search hadn't gone well.

“I didn't manage to find anything out.”

Her expression changed. But she didn't lose her temper; was it because she knew that merchants practically refused to stay down after falling (unless paid to do so), or because she'd anticipated this result?

“..What now?”

He lost control of his tone of voice and answered her in a merchant's tone.

“Unless a merchant conducts business on their own, they'll always leave behind records of their acquisitions. So if what we seek is truly here, there will surely be such a record.”

Pisky's writing in the recreation hall was the best evidence of this. Even an item whose existence had to be kept a secret had to be noted down in a record somewhere. It was precisely this habit of merchants that had allowed them to turn the tables in Gerube.

“Hmph.”

With one hand at her waist, she exhaled forcefully and seemed to nod while staring straight at him. She turned her face away and lowered it, her tail swelling up like a pouch being filled with water.

“Did you think you could brush me off just like that?”

If he was entirely sober, he'd probably be able to withstand the coldness in her voice. He slowly raised both hands up in surrender. He wanted to blame the alcohol for letting such superficial,

merchant-like words roll off his tongue.

“I admit that until the bone's existence is disproven, I *could* just pretend that I'm searching hard for them.”

And in fact, it was impossible to disprove their existence. She closed her eyes as she listened with her large wolf's ears, as though she was pondering what he meant. He knew what he had to say.

“I'm sorry, for forcing you to be so patient.”

Her shoulders suddenly reeled back in surprise. He was momentarily awestruck by the sight of her acting like a child whose mischief had just been uncovered, but chose to respond with a smile.

“I'm just a lowly traveling merchant, only capable of gathering information in such roundabout ways. But for you—”

For her, it would surely be possible to prove whether the devil himself existed. Alcohol had a way of freeing one's mind from the constraints of logic, and normally Lawrence would have spoken more prudently, but right now his swirling brain was letting his tongue wag on its own accord. If Holo hadn't covered his mouth with both hands, he surely would have finished that sentence.

“..”

He had accidentally removed the lid from a box that should have remained closed. That's what the look on her face was saying, as she kept her hands on his mouth. And yet, she was being very gentle. He remained silent for quite a while, but since she wasn't speaking he slowly took her hands and lifted them off his face.

“Did you learn nothing from that incident in Gerube? With something as expensive as a holy relic, any attempt of mine to take it by force would only leave me utterly spent just like the last time. It would not only be very hard on me, but on you as well.”

Her hands were small, and her fingers quite slender. For one with her true form, this kind of appearance had to be the least convenient one possible. Her giant fangs and claws could easily win her just about anything she desired in this world.

“It's as you said in Gerube: everything would be resolved in an instant if you simply used your fangs and claws.”

The high walls of a monastery, an iron gate, heavy chains, even the results of a dedicated locksmith working with all his heart and soul.. Holo could decimate them all and expose the

secrets they hid to the world.

What resistance could the monastery's guards possibly offer? That much was obvious. They may have the force of authority, but that meant little to her. Her power could devastate the entire monastery and accomplish her goal in the blink of an eye. But she didn't choose to, and the reason why was simple.

“If-”

She finally opened her mouth and spoke.

“If you wish to be somewhere far away, I can take you there on my back. If you wish to obtain something, I can bring it to you. If you are under attack, I can shake off your pursuers. If there is something you wish to protect, I can assist you. But..”

She gently uncurled the fingers of his right hand and slipped her little hand into his.

“It's only possible for *me* to do something for *you* if you stay in your human form.”

She could easily help him when he was in trouble, but that same strength also meant she could solve her own problems more quickly by herself. Although their relationship seemed to be one that only he could benefit from, the two of them knew that such a bird-and-chick relationship couldn't work unless one was really the mother, and the other was her chick.

They'd already gained a fairly solid grasp of Yoitsu's location. If he gave this task of finding the bones up to her, he'd lose his one remaining chance to do something for her sake. She had the power to solve her own problems, and far more efficiently, so she was worried that once he felt useless to her he wouldn't want to stay at her side.

He understood why she'd feel that way, but he was too realistic to console her with a smiling, “you're worrying too much.” A business partnership was only successful when both parties were useful to one another. Holo had already experienced what happened in Pasloe what happened when a relationship was no longer mutually beneficial.

He pulled on his right hand, bringing it and her toward him. He then curled his left arm around her back. But he was still seated, so the result was that his face was buried in her chest. He'd be lying if he said it wasn't embarrassing. But he was already embarrassed, so it didn't matter if he made it worse on impulse. She was surprised at first, but when she realized his intent she relaxed and put her other hand on his head.

“I'm sorry.. please be patient for a bit longer, okay?”

It was his own fault that she had to wait, and he wanted her to see that he knew that.

“..Aye.”

She nodded gently and spoke in that position, which was almost the complete opposite of what they were used to. She acted like a priest receiving a believer's confession, and forgave him for his weakness as her hand rested on his head. It almost seemed like she wanted to apologize, for once.

“Don't you apologize to me. If you do, all my hard work will have been for naught.”

It was the first time he'd ever buried his face in her shallow bosom, but that only made it easier for him to look up at her face sincerely. She angrily pinched his smiling cheeks. She seemed to be telling him to not look down on her, despite knowing that he was purposely teasing her. She continued pinching his cheeks for a while before finally letting go and showing a weary smile.

“I may not be able to control myself if I discover that the bones are truly those of one of my comrades.”

“It's fine if you lose control, because after you've gone on a fang-filled rampage I'll be left with a very important task.”

He could easily imagine her form, frozen as she stared at the bones of her comrade. If that moment came and he wasn't at her side, everything they had been through would be one big lie.

“You sure have a lot of confidence.”

“It's as you always say, I'm a foolish mule.”

Every time Holo truly felt happy, her head would tuck in and she would smile as though she couldn't contain her excitement. That reaction was all he needed to determinedly seek out the bones, regardless of how much effort it required.

“Heh.. if we whisper here for too long, it might raise suspicion.”

He wondered whether purposely answering “about what?” would make him seem too stupid, but before he could make up his mind she quickly pushed herself away. The smile on her face was one of mischief, one of having seen the way he was hesitating. He was too late. She grinned extra-wide when she saw him smile sheepishly, clearly revealing her fangs.

“Dinner is still hot. Will you eat?”

He stood up, raising the white flag of surrender.

“I think I could use a stiff drink.”

“Then take your time and enjoy yourself.”

She teased him delightedly.

When he opened the thin wooden door, he was greatly relieved to see that Cole was still listening intently to Huskins' lecture.

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## Chapter 3

Lawrence rolled his head gently, worried that it might fall off as he tried to clear whatever drunkenness lingered in his mind. He then lightly patted his cheeks.

He felt he had no right to call himself a traveling merchant if it took a whole day for him to sober up, but soon found another excuse for his sluggishness – perhaps he had just been that tired. Whatever the reason, he hadn't been able to savor a moment's leisure.

He now watched the almost-extinguished flames in the stove with the same vigor he usually felt after rising from bed. After all, this wasn't an inn in some noisy market or a cabin on some desolate mountain.

The sounds of people talking, sheep bleating, and dogs barking outside softly filled the room like a sweet lullaby. These sounds mixed with the crackling of burning firewood, flickering flames, and the rustling of collapsing ashes to create a wonderfully soporific melody.

He yawned fantastically before rubbing the eyes he had struggled to open. He saw that the drying meat had hardened and become a dark color, and noticed strings of garlic and onions hanging from a horizontal beam. Even without money, people could survive. This room was a classic example of that kind of lifestyle.

He yawned once more after tending to the fire in the stove.

“Good morning.”

Cole, who hadn't yawned at all since he got up, finally greeted him. The boy's tattered clothes and disheveled hair exuded poverty, and his slender wrists and ankles spoke of a past without regular meals. But his eyes, gleaming with wisdom, revealed him to be a traveling student and not a beggar. Those strong and unyielding eyes underscored just how different the two lifestyles were.

“Today's really cold too.”

“If it was really that cold you wouldn't even get out from under the covers.”

“Yeah.. it's cold, but it's the tolerable kind of cold.”

There was a curiously tacit understanding between the two of them since they both relied on Holo's tail for warmth. The very first thing they would do after getting out of bed and checking on the fire was pat away the tail fur they had stuck to them. With such a daily routine it would have been more difficult for them to *not* share such an understanding.

“Is Holo still asleep?”

“Miss Holo was all curled up in a ball – I don't think she's awake yet.”

It was impossible for Lawrence to hold back a scoffing laugh. He handed Cole some bread and dried meat as he ate some himself.

“When the morning bell rings, let's head straight for the alliance's inn.”

“Uh.. shouldn't we wake Miss Holo up for that?”

Cole was looking out the window with a serious look on his face, clearly using his knowledge of the calendar and the sun's height to calculate the hour.

“Don't worry about it. If she's not awake by then, just let her sleep.”

“..Won't she get angry?”

While his articulate speech made him seem rather learned, his appearance as he ate bread made him seem more like a puppy or kitten. He stuffed the entire piece of bread in his mouth and was finished in the blink of an eye, careful to not let a single crumb fall.

“Nah, that won't get her angry. If she ever got *that* serious, she'd just go ahead and find the bones on her own.”

“Huh? Uh.. what..”

Of course Cole was aware of Holo's powerful true form, and so he must have already considered that possibility. But he still said nothing. He reasoned, of course, that he had no right to interfere with Lawrence's work. But after showing such surprise at Lawrence's words, he stole a glance in Holo's direction as she slept. His cheerful smile and the words he spoke next were beyond Lawrence's expectation.

“She must have great faith in us. We'll have to do our best.”

It was Lawrence's turn to be surprised.

“Uh, what?”

Cole watched Lawrence's dumbstruck expression, wondering if he'd said something strange.

“Oh, nothing..”

Lawrence waved one hand at Cole as he furiously rubbed his face with the other. His gestures

were so exaggerated that he looked like he was poorly mimicking a potter working with clay. The lad was just full of surprises.

“I was just wondering if I was that smart when I was your age.”

“Huh.. I’m not smart..”

That only made Lawrence's wonder if *he* was too dumb, despite knowing that there were many gifted people in the world. The trick was to not be jealous, but instead work hard so one didn't lose to them.

“Though since you've already seen how useless I am, there's really no need to impress me anymore.”

Lawrence dusted the crumbs off his hands as he stood up. The world's truths weren't going to change. What Lawrence needed to do now wasn't to change them, but steer himself to properly take advantage of the winds of truth.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

“Hmm?”

Cole stood up as well, picking up his coat and speaking somewhat grudgingly.

“To be honest, I've always hoped to grow up and become someone like you in the future, but I always get the feeling I won't be able to.”

Those words were probably the highest honor a man Lawrence's age could receive, but he still deemed himself too young to rightly accept such praise.

“That wouldn't be a problem if you were my apprentice.”

He rubbed the boy's head roughly as he continued.

“But where traveling companions are concerned, it's a waste for two identical people to travel together. It's precisely the ability to counter another's shortcomings that make one an ideal traveling companion.”

Holo would probably be wryly smiling under the covers right now, if she was awake. Cole, on the other hand, acted like he'd just been exposed to some great Biblical truth, and seriously nodded his head.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Yes, please do.”

The moment they exchanged those words the tolling of a bell was heard outside. They simultaneously turned and listened to the sound, then prepared for their next move. Lawrence could tell why Holo liked Cole; his own heart was calmer when he saw the boy.

The weather was clear, and the sun was dazzling.

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“First we'll have to confirm what's on their list of holy relics. We might get lucky, and the monasteries' clerics might have accidentally listed it there.”

“Then I should play a student on an educational pilgrimage?”

“If anyone asks, you might as well stress your interest in Church law. Did you learn much about that while you were at school?”

Lawrence watched Cole wrap his feet in a few layers of cloth as they sat under the quiet eaves of the dormitory, where few people bothered going. His straw sandals wouldn't keep his feet from freezing if he didn't at least do that much.

“Our teacher never taught us anything concerning money.”

“Is that so? That's perfect.”

Cole seemed taken aback for a moment, but then bound his feet tightly and quickly smiled.

“I haven't had a chance to learn anything about that, so will you please teach me?”

“A fine performance.”



He patted the boy's head and they strode off. The sky was clear for miles in every direction and the sun was dizzyingly bright. Looking down at the ground did nothing to help, since the sunlight simply reflected back up off the silvery snow.

Some merchants chose to cross over mountains to get an edge over others who took the long way around; they were often darkly tanned even in the wintertime. Having experienced the sting of the light now made it easy to understand why those merchants also tended to have poor eyesight. Cole squinted as soon as he stepped outside, his eyes had a hard time adjusting to the brightness as well.

“I hope we'll find what we're looking for on that list.”

“That's your job.”

Cole froze up upon hearing this, letting out a surprised “huh!?”

“You know more about Church lore than I do. The patron saints of shepherds, which saints were once pagan gods, which superstitions are related to sheep and wolves.. that sort of thing. So you're in charge of telling fact from fiction.”

Holo didn't just like Cole because he behaved quaintly; she also admired his strong will.

“..Got it.”

Despite his surprise, he replied obediently. Lawrence assumed a master's tone in response.

“Then I'll leave it up to you.”

He thrust out his chest and opened the door of the designated inn for the Ruvik Alliance.

“Mm..? Hey~! Sure was exciting with you here last night.”

As he opened the door, Lawrence discovered that a handful of merchants were already drinking and talking. One of them greeted him, waving a jug in his hand. Drinking so early in the morning might seem excessive, but it wasn't unusual for those trapped in an inn due to wind and snow.

“Morning! I'm here to thank Mr. Pisky for last night's feast.”

“Lago's at the holy sanctuary. He's attending a routine negotiation. He's a young fella, but an able one.”

Lawrence inwardly deduced that the man was probably talking about a “routine” negotiation with the leadership, because the man's tone made it seem that Pisky wasn't merely a liaison. Maybe the alliance intended to establish a town or market here after buying the monastery's land. It seemed highly unlikely that a man with such an unusual job would only serve as a

liaison.

“Ah, so he’s at the holy sanctuary. Thanks.”

“No problem! Come have another drink with us sometime! You’ll have to bring your boss along next time.”

Of course that “boss” was the fictional rich man Lawrence had fabricated to gather information. The man’s remark seemed a bit straightforward, but it let Lawrence stay composed and be equally to-the-point. The truth was that no matter what one’s intentions were, being suspected was probably worse than being discovered, since imaginations often drove suspicion beyond the facts.

“Aren’t they supposed to be holding a mass at the sanctuary now instead?”

Cole asked his question as they walked to there from the inn.

“I don’t think they’ve got much of a choice. Their position seems weaker than I’d expected.”

The sanctuary seemed more dazzling than an intricately-carved gem in the white snow and sunlight. But those who most were praying the most fervently to God had been ushered outside, making it crystal-clear what the situation was. Only a few devout merchants stood in silent prayer just outside the tightly-shut doors.

The doors swung open just as Lawrence wondered to do next. One by one, a procession emerged. First came elegantly-dressed merchants, then their servants, then experienced-looking merchants who carried sheepskin parchments. Pisky was at the head of the last group. When he noticed Lawrence on the roadside, he left the group and approached them.

“Good morning, Mr. Lawrence. How’d you fare last night?”

“My traveling companion loves liquor, so all I got were complaints.”

“Haha! Then by all means, invite her out to drink with us next time.”

Lawrence took the opportunity to size up Pisky’s outfit as they greeted one another. Based on his clothing, he didn’t seem to be in such a low position.

“Mr. Pisky, have you a moment?”

Hearing Lawrence’s inviting words, Pisky glanced back at the merchants exiting the sanctuary with him.

“If it’s not for too long.”

Lawrence was surprised, but not because Pisky was willing to make time for him. Rather, his gestures seemed to indicate that he was doing Lawrence a favor. The only reason Pisky would emphasize that was if he felt he already owed Lawrence a favor, so Lawrence expressed his gratitude with a business smile.

“My thanks. Where would be best for me to wait for you?”

“Well, I happen to have some work to do, so why don’t you wait for me in the reference center?”

“The reference center?”

“Oh! My apologies, it’s that building over there. There’s a clerk on the ground floor there who looks like a theological scholar. Just mention my name to him.”

He pointed at an inconspicuous stone building directly behind another one by the roadside. Judging from its having only shuttered windows instead of glass ones, it didn't see a lot of visitors.

“I still have to file a report and pack some things, so please head to the reference center in a little while.”

“Understood. I'll meet you later, at the reference center.”

Pisky then made his way toward the alliance's inn. Lawrence and Cole didn't have to wait long before they saw a familiar figure slowly approaching them. Soon, they confirmed that it was indeed Holo.

“Perhaps I shall join you after all.”

Her soft voice rang out from under her hood. The two of them wondered how long she'd been debating joining them, seeing the obvious sleep marks on her face. But of course, neither of the two males tried to confirm it. They simply nodded in response.

Half an hour later, the three of them arrived at the building Pisky had pointed out. They discovered that indeed, a bearded man who looked like a theological scholar was presiding there with a frown. After mentioning Pisky, they were granted admission to the innermost reference room.

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They discovered that, true to its name, the reference room was filled all sorts of documents. But it struck Lawrence as odd that none of those documents seemed to be of any use to a merchant. There were maps, sketches of towns, lists of craftsmen's guilds, and family trees of

the inter-married aristocracy.

Pisky seemed to have a personal office here. The clerk led them through the deserted reference room and up to a door. As Lawrence expected, the room behind that door was also stuffed with documents.

“Our apologies for intruding on your work.”

“No problem. Although it really doesn’t make up for anything, my companions were rude last night so I wanted to take this chance to apologize to you.”

That explained why Pisky felt he owed Lawrence a favor.

“You’re being too polite. Your companions gave me a lot of information. I can’t thank them enough.”

Lawrence paused briefly before jokingly continuing.

“And if you act like this, it’ll only make it harder for me to ask you for more help in the future.”

A loan recorded in a financial logbook would always be repaid eventually. But it was also an immutable truth that one’s loss was another’s gain.

“Haha! Of course, if it’s something too difficult I might ask for compensation. Exactly how may I be of assistance to you? If it’s something I can easily arrange, you only have to name it.”

“To be honest, like you said last night, I was wondering whether it wouldn’t be too much trouble to let me see the list of the monastery’s holy relics that your alliance is aware of.”

“Oh, so that really was it. I thought there was more to it. Well, there is indeed a listing of the relics, just take a look through this!”

As he spoke he plucked a document from the top of the pile of parchments on his desk before handing it to Lawrence. It indeed contained an extensive list of holy relics.

“I prepared it just in case, since we’d arranged to meet here.”

Lawrence scrolled through a page or two before lifting his face in gratitude.

“My thanks. If a trivial merchant like me went knocking on the main monastery’s gates for a list of their relics, I’d be kicked out for sure.”

“Now *you’re* being too polite. You can probably guess from how casually I handed them over to you, but that list is completely useless. Almost everything listed there has next to no value. I’m sure a sad smile will spread across your face after you’ve seen for yourself, but go ahead and

have a look.”

He said that with the voice of a vintner recommending fine wines. Lawrence scrolled through the parchment and quickly realized that he was telling the truth. He didn't even need to know the precise market values of each item to know that, while they were renowned relics meant to be worth an astronomical sum, “relics of renown” were items that weren't unique, but so common anyone would know what they were.

“Most of them seem to have been bought as bribes. After all, a monastery can't openly accept a bribe. So even if they know the item's fake, the heads of a monastery will buy such relics from kings or nobles if it's to maintain their reputation. The rope Saint Amelia hanged herself with is a perfect example. If you connected all the fakes around the world, it would have been too long for her to hang herself from *any* tree.”

Sure enough, the list even included a great sage's right eye, said to be able to predict the future. Lawrence was already aware of at least four churches who had this “eye of wisdom.” It was no more unusual than seeing a shop selling spears that could pierce anything, right next to a shop selling shield that could repel anything. This wasn't something rare in the world.

“But you might not find what you're looking for listed on there, Mr. Lawrence. After all, the Golden Sheep's just a legend without any physical evidence. Heck, I've even heard that the one man who plucked a bit of its golden wool..”

“No, no. What we're after is something as vast as the clouds in the sky, not something so straightforward. Like clouds, it's something impossible to grab, floating high up there in sky. All you can do is-”

“-Follow the trail behind it, right?”

“Exactly. If we can find the patron saints the shepherds worshiped, or the items they left behind, that might be evidence the Brondel Monastery is hiding awareness of the Golden Sheep's existence. Then that evidence could be used as the basis for a claim that the Golden Sheep truly exists.”

Lawrence knew that it was a far-fetched argument, but someones one had to resort to such a farce to appease their customers. Pisky seemed to understand that sentiment, being someone who led people to a “new haven” that was little more than untamed wilderness. He affected a heavy sigh, nodded his head and showed a wry smile.

“Alas, it's as you said. It seems that what we're looking for isn't here..”

Lawrence handed the list to Cole and Holo after scanning it for a while. They hadn't requested to see it because they knew the roles they had to play right now. After briefly glancing at them, Pisky replied.

“I'm sorry the list didn't help you in the end.. though it feels strange to be the one apologizing.”

Lawrence couldn't help but laugh at Pisky's joke.

“We've investigated that list as well, Lord knows how many times. You can find the relics there almost anywhere. Of course some of them are highly sought-after items that can be sold immediately after purchase, but.. in all honesty there's another reason I showed you the list.”

“Another reason?”

A regretful smile crossed Pisky's face as he heard Lawrence repeat him.

“Yes. I was wondering if there was an item hidden on there that carried a deeper significance.”

His words made Lawrence instinctively look at the parchment that his companions were carefully reading. The items there were ones that could be found in any wealthy church or monastery, but they were completely useless. It was impossible to tell what legends they were connected with, or even if they were local. It felt more to Lawrence like a list of ways rich people wasted their money.

However, Pisky's meaning got through to Lawrence. He wanted to know if there were any items there that weren't bought merely as a show of power, but due to an unwavering belief or conviction. It wasn't difficult to guess why he desired to find such an item. The monastery was stubbornly resisting the Ruvik Alliance, so he probably sought a weapon to break that resistance. A basic principle of negotiation was to know your opponent's desires.

“Before this I was at the holy sanctuary, participating in routine negotiations. The people of the monastery still show an admirable sense of unity, even in the face of financial and political crisis. Even though they're down to begging imperial merchants to sponsor their springtime religious festivals, they're still putting on that tough act.”

“Are they really in such dire financial and political straits?”

Pisky nodded, and let out a light sigh.

“There's the daily expenses for building maintenance, candles, documents and manuscripts, fresh parchments to copy them to, shepherds' salaries, livestock feed.. and that's just the start. Since they're an important monastery, they have formal religious meetings every few years that cost a lot in travel expenses. Then there's the costs to lodge important guests and the upkeep of their sister monasteries, plus the tribute to the Pope in the south. *And* they're also the king's personal bank vault, since he's willing to overlook their autonomy. With all this they can't last much longer.”

Of course even a monastery was connected to the outside world, and those connections meant that it had to adhere to the world's rules and laws in order to continue existing. But it sounded like their situation was far graver than Lawrence had imagined.

“The huge fortune they've accumulated over the years is all thanks to their wool sales, so it goes without saying that they've no shortage of minds able to think in terms of profit and loss. There are bound to be those among them willing to seek a practical compromise. And yet, in spite of that, their council remains united in opposition against us..”

“Are you implying that they couldn't possibly be so unified without some deeper underlying conviction?”

Humans couldn't be stubborn forever without some force backing them. That was all the more true for groups of humans with differing views. Pisky probably wouldn't be complaining if the monastery had united simply to defend the authority of their Lord.

Monasteries also had those among their ranks who loved riches, even if they also had saintly members devoted in their prayers to God. In spite of this they still showed such great unity, which frustrated the Ruvik Alliance and was simply beyond their comprehension.

“I think their unity is best explainable if they invested in some holy relic. If the devout accepted it, then it'd naturally become a spiritual pillar for them to get through this hard time. So if we found out what investment they're clinging onto so tightly, we could crumble their opposition in one strike.”

It was a very direct method of attack. When Lawrence directed his gaze to Holo and Cole, he noticed their eyes were lost in thought despite acting as if they were failing to find anything useful on the parchment listing the relics.

The legendary bones of the wolf deity.. if they weren't just some unfounded rumor only suitable for idle banter at banquets, then they perfectly fit into Pisky's theory.

“I think it's a good theory, but.. everyone around me doubts they would possibly pin their hopes on a bunch of relics that are likely all counterfeits. Personally though, I think that's just a good cover the monastery's using.”

“I see.. that does indeed make sense.”

The reason Lawrence kept quiet about the wolf deity's bones was because they'd only lead them in a negative direction. He was up against the powerful Ruvik Alliance. It was so powerful that even the port town of Gerube didn't compare.

If he was too careless and got swept up into this affair, he'd be unable to back out this time without serious consequences. Cole and Holo seemed to have caught on to his train of thought,

letting their eyes fall back on the parchment.

“To be honest, after you'd gathered your information and left last night, I was so excited I couldn't sleep.”

Pisky smiled in self-ridicule on his chair. It was as if he was revealing the fatigue he'd been keeping bottled up inside of him. And thinking back on it, him saying 'We've investigated that list as well, Lord knows how many times' now took on new meaning. The image of Pisky surfaced in Lawrence's mind, secretly and meticulously poring over the list of relics in candlelight late at night.

“After all, any evidence to help us break this stalemate would be more pleasing than any of the gospels. Having pored over that entire document, over and over, only to find that it was a waste of time in the end.. well, that feeling of emptiness can't be described. And yet maybe you could uncover something I'd missed – it's with that hope that I handed the document over to you.”

“I'm sorry I wasn't able to be of any help.”

The two of them burst into laughter after Lawrence said that. Unlike a bread shop owner who simply sold bread from behind the counter his whole life, a merchant who jumped at such opportunities had to swing between this kind of anticipation and disappointment. But such merchants wouldn't let a setback deter them, and continued on in hope. But Lawrence was concerned about one other thing.

“Might I pose a foolish question?”

“Hmm?”

“Will it really profit the alliance that much if you manage to buy the monastery's land?”

The Ruvik Alliance wasn't established to go after the petty levels of profit a small-town company desired. They were an enormous organization possessing numerous warships and cargo vessels. If a town was imposing tariffs to protect their own merchants, the alliance could pressure them and force them to stop.

Lawrence had heard of many large-scale deals the Ruvik Alliance had taken part in, each dealing with sums so large that he could not help but think, “So there really *are* that many coins in the world.”

For the merchants of such an alliance to keep coming here from their companies meant that this had extreme profit potential. But it was simply impossible for a traveling merchant like Lawrence to fathom how many digits the final amount would contain. Just how much money could they make?

Pisky scratched his nose and smiled, somewhat embarrassed by Lawrence's question.

“If you’re asking me how many gold coins we could gain in profit, even I can’t imagine it. But I can assure you of one thing - this deal would profit a *whole* lot of people.”

“A *whole* lot?”

Lawrence couldn't help but repeat him, having a hard time picturing something like that. There were a lot of people in the alliance, so on the face of it Pisky's words weren't strange, but he still felt that there was more behind them.

“Indeed. You have a general idea of what we plan to do here, right?”

“Your alliance plans to buy the crisis-plagued monastery's land and use it to win over the aristocracy, thereby allowing you to intervene in this countries' politics.”

“Precisely. But if we just handed the land out to aristocrats, their tendencies toward extravagance, appearances and faith would mean they'd donate it to other churches and monasteries, and it'll be given away just like that. And even if they didn't, in the long-term it would be divided into smaller and smaller pieces as inheritance, until they had nothing left and fell from grace. In other words, neither they nor we would gain anything. Which is precisely why I was called in to find a solution.”

Pisky's smile was steady, and his tone lazy and unhurried. He certainly wouldn't act that way because he was used to sharing this information with others, nor because he was a naturally composed individual. He simply had confidence.

His was the kind of composure that was unique to one who was proud of his work. Holo was the first to notice it, lifting her head. It was why Lawrence couldn't help but feel uneasy around Pisky. Just like a craftsman with peerless skill, Pisky's foothold was firm. In the face of that, Lawrence's feelings bordered on anxiety.

They planned to buy the monastery's unused land, and settle immigrants there. In other words, build a village or town. Pisky's personal office and the adjacent room were full of reference material; it was a design studio specifically made for someone like him.

“Because the monastery's neglected their unused land, the feudal lords around here haven't been able to earn a sufficient income, or even guarantee their farmers enough land to lead happy lives. As you know, many on the mainland are forced to abandon their homes from war, famine, disease, floods, and so on and end up homeless. Without jobs or money they can only steal or beg for a living. If the world fills up with people like that, there could be no rule of law.”

“In other words your alliance plans to lead these people to a new haven, provide them with homes and jobs, and at the same time sell a favor to the feudal lords being plagued by wandering rogues, yes?”

“Yes. If we can overcome this obstacle, the rest of the plan will proceed smoothly. It's not like this is just about making money. I know it sounds conceited, but once you've experienced helping those who've lost their homes to rebuild new ones, it's-”

Hypocrisy and charity were only separated by a thin line. Only those who truly understood that could give an honestly wry smile in such a situation.

“-It's hard to not get addicted. Even the tiniest piece of evidence will send one into an all-night frenzy, studying whatever documents they have on hand.”

Holo paused midway through what she was doing and listened to Pisky intently. Of course, Lawrence couldn't blame her. If she was really so closed-minded and her claim that his work didn't interest her was true, then all the times she'd lost control while they traveled would have been a lie.

Lawrence was instinctively worried about what effect Pisky's words would have on her, but then noticed that his other reliable companion had already reached out a helping hand. Cole's face showed determination as he grasped Holo's hand under the parchment.

“Once, there were a few immigrants whose village was burned down by pirates, scattering the inhabitants. Some members of one family were abducted by the pirates, and never expected to see their families again. They eventually received word about the immigration, and reunited with their lost family members in the new village. That's the kind of feeling that makes it impossible to quit. And though you might not think it, such cases are actually rather common.”

Lawrence was all too aware that they were common and not the least bit unusual. As he passed through towns and villages he'd often be asked whether he'd seen such-and-such a person in such-and-such a place, or whether a given village still existed after rumors of war.

He'd even encountered slaves who'd been taken from their homes, yet managed to earn enough money to buy their freedom. They'd sometimes be from such remote places that they'd first have to wander around and lose track of where they were.

And this kind of thing wasn't just limited to humans. Despite her current expressionless, sculpture-like face, if one were to touch Holo's cheek right now they might see a tear stream down her face. After all, she was also one of those wanderers.

“Naturally, since a lot of people are involved in immigrations, there's money to be made as well. And anyone from the alliance is treated with hospitality by towns established by the alliance. But those perks aren't what makes the job irresistible. Anyone who's done business

while traveling is sensitive to the idea of a ‘hometown.’ We're clinging to the monastery so stubbornly and refusing to leave because of these things. If it was just for ourselves, there would be no reason to persevere this long, but because it's for others we're able to keep up this struggle.”

His last line sounded almost harsh to Lawrence's ears, because it had to be true. It was why he was standing here and making an effort for Holo, after all.

“Haha! Sorry to bore you with all this nonsense.”

“Not-”

Lawrence stuttered in the face of Pisky's smile of self-ridicule.

“Not at all. I understand your sentiments, because I'm the same.”

The very instant Lawrence said that, Pisky seemed to suddenly realize why Lawrence traveled with his companions, and why they had all set out on this extraordinary journey. He first looked at Cole, then Holo, who both responded with wry smiles. He then nodded his head and spoke.

“If you don't mind my asking, might I ask what place the two of you call your hometown?”

“They're both northerners from the mainland, but they're from different precise locations.”

Pisky neither widened his eyes in surprise nor revealed a smile of sympathy or pity. Instead, he passionately asked them a question like he was confronting a business opponent.

“Are the two of you searching for treasures whose origins can be traced to your hometowns?”

War was always accompanied by plundering, and the Church's crusade against pagans was little different from a war. There was no shortage of objects, even from pagan lands, which came to be viewed as holy relics with high price tags after they'd been plundered. In fact, it was precisely because of such objects that the Church never stopped sending knights off on those crusades.

“That's the gist of it. The two of them are searching for traces of their hometowns, and I in turn require their knowledge. It can be considered a minor miracle that the three of us even met.”

“Ah, that's how it is.. then in other words, Mr. Lawrence, you first found a sponsor to fund your investigation, and then found these two to guide you, huh? Fate sure is incredible, isn't it?”

“I don't know whether I should thank the heavens for it. I'm suffering from mixed emotions.”

Pisky laughed dryly upon hearing a joke so completely unsuitable for a monastic setting. It was precisely because a bad joke was inappropriate that it drove others more easily to laughter.

“I'm sorry for that shameful display. In any case, having heard that, I'm happy to lend you my services. Don't hesitate to ask for anything.”

“You've already been a great help to us just by letting us see this list. Thank you.”

Pisky wasn't acting so frankly because he was an outstanding merchant, but because he was naturally a very considerate person.

“May the three of you find what you are after.”

He spoke that line as if not saying it would have hurt. His attitude made Lawrence realize from the bottom of his heart that Pisky held his present job not just because he wanted money or thanks.

Though it pained Lawrence, he had to admit that Pisky completely had the upper hand on him. He couldn't help but think it was a good thing that Holo hadn't met Pisky before him. If she had, what would things be like now?

He couldn't stop that thought from occupying his mind. He wasn't the type of person who had complete confidence in himself, after all. Lost in his train of thought, he was about to release a sigh of self-deprecation when he heard knocking at the door.

When Pisky opened the door there was an alliance messenger before him. The messenger's words naturally made their way into Lawrence's ears as well, and so he learned that he was there to summon Pisky, who replied to him and then turned back to Lawrence.

“My apologies, it seems the alliance seeks my presence..”

The reference center was naturally the most significant place at the monastery for the alliance. They wouldn't be allowed to stay there anymore if Pisky wasn't there to accompany them. Lawrence cautiously received the parchment back from Holo and Cole, and handed it to Pisky with his thanks.

“Thank you for your great help.”

“Think nothing of it. Feel free to come see me anytime if it's over something small like this.”

Just seeing the innocent smile on Pisky's face made Lawrence feel that it'd been worthwhile to come here. After they'd left the room, Pisky locked the door. Lawrence couldn't help but feel awed by the number of new hometowns that might be founded here. Holo's face seemed to convey the same sense of awe, as if having woken from a dream - it seemed that she was thinking the same thing.

“Then we'll take our leave.”

After Pisky bid them farewell outside the reference center, he headed back to the green-flagged inn while they headed in the opposite direction. The weather was so clear that anyone could forget about the snow that surrounded them if they gazed up at the sky for a while. All three of them were silent as they pondered things, but just as Lawrence was about to break that silence, Holo stopped walking.

“What is it?”

Lawrence and Cole turned back several paces ahead of her. Her head was lowered, so Lawrence couldn't see the expression concealed by her hood. But her slender shoulders seemed more dejected than usual, so Lawrence could tell she wasn't in high spirits.

“You two go on ahead.. I wish to take a walk.”

She was smiling, judging from the shape of her lips, but Lawrence often wished she would reserve her smiles only for when she was feeling happy. Cole seemed ready to approach her, his face full of sympathy, but Lawrence stopped him.

“Just take care that you don't catch cold. If you get sick here, they'll drag you off to say those prayers you love so dearly.”

“Foolish mule.”

Despite only saying two simple words, a great cloud of mist escaped her lips. Just like that, she turned around and walked off. Cole seemed pained, and put his hand to his chest as he watched her back recede before looking up at Lawrence. It was impossible that he'd misunderstood Holo's reason for acting the way she did.

There was an old saying that “seeing was believing.” Indeed, actually seeing a professional site like this left a drastically different impression compared to verbal descriptions. The impact of seeing Pisky's workplace was totally different to the impact of hearing descriptions about how new hometowns were built.

Moreover, Pisky was a good man. He didn't only act for the sake of money, despite having his own desires. Holo broke into a slow jog after a few paces, and soon turned a corner and vanished from their sight. Lawrence's heart was aching as he watched her back. Maybe hers was aching too, back then. If she had met Pisky first..

“Should I go after her?”

Lawrence breathed in the frigid air, and exhaled it as warm air. The two of them stood in the middle of the road, but they weren't any more conspicuous than the other merchants who also stood around while chatting. After another deep breath, he continued walking.

“I don't really know if following her is the best idea, but.. I feel that Miss Holo would definitely be happy about it.”

He wasn't Holo, but Lawrence wanted to pay Cole on the head for his model answer. Unfortunately, a model answer wasn't always the correct one.

“Even though my hometown still exists?”

Cole breathed in sharply, and suddenly froze in his tracks. Lawrence didn't stop, but Cole soon caught up with him.

“The gods may dwell in the heavens, free of aging and disease, yet they still comfort us.”

If Holo was a genius with wordplay, Cole was one in the art of persuasion. Since he was always true to himself, his words always managed to touch other's hearts. He'd also studied Church law, so he knew how to use Biblical quotes to aid in his persuasion. But a lost and confused traveling merchant who even lied to himself found it impossible to be persuaded so easily.

“Sorry. I know my own lack of courage. And I fear that if I go after her, I'll only be rejected.”

“Miss Holo won't reject you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Lawrence paused and gazed at Cole, who was even slightly shorter than Holo. Even if it wasn't Lawrence's intention, that height difference alone was enough to put pressure on the boy. His face was stiff, but not because Cole had been insolent or because it was cold. He resumed walking, and waited for Cole to catch up before he resuming talking.

“But it's not that I have so little faith in her. It's not from sadness or loneliness, I just think that her heart's wavering a little. She must have started her journey convinced that her home was either still there or already gone, but the idea that a new one might be built in its place may not have crossed her mind. I'd rather believe that she isn't sure how to face such an idea, or how to handle herself.”

Having arrived at the shepherd's dormitory, he opened the thin door to their room and entered before continuing.

“I couldn't possibly intervene in everything Holo does, and I couldn't possibly solve all of her problems. Given this truth, all I can do is my very best.”

He would put all of his effort toward the best possible solution, just like Holo would expect.

He put some hay in the stove, and sparks danced in the air as the flames spread to it.

“Surely you two noticed how the wolf-deity's bones fit into all of this, didn't you?”

“..You mean how the bones are precisely the kind of thing Mr. Pisky is looking for?”

“Exactly. It's just like we saw in Gerube. All holy relics are highly valued, and depending on how they're used they can even serve as a means to maintain faith. After all, our search for the bones can be construed as a quest of faith, just like searching for the Golden Sheep. That's precisely the kind of thing Pisky's after.”

If the monastery had been willing to buy the bones, even knowing they belonged to a pagan god, then their conviction was all too obvious. Their council would be united, having a means to save the monastery from both a practical and a spiritual perspective.

In a twisted way, the more clever a decision was the more likely it would be riddled with traps, just like how a simpler lie was easier for someone to see through. But Lawrence had abstained from saying anything to Pisky simply because he felt it wasn't his decision to make.

“Why didn't you say anything to Mr. Pisky back there, Mr. Lawrence?”

At the time, Lawrence was sure that Holo had noticed his concerns and that Cole probably grasped the basic situation as well. He only had to think back to what happened in Gerube to guess what Lawrence was concerned about.

“Because that would give them enough information to make an important decision. If I casually told him what we know, we'd be forced to distance ourselves from them. Do you think someone in the alliance's position would act on simple hearsay? They'd probably force me to swear an oath, and depending on how things went, would likely make me take responsibility if their plans failed. They might even use me as a shield if a fight broke out with the monastery.”

“You mean it's impossible for us to stay completely uninvolved?”

“Yes. They're very powerful. If we reveal what we know and they consider it likely, everything they've negotiated and discovered about the monastery's relics will be overturned. And if it turns out that the bones really do exist, proof will surface soon enough. At that point we'd be forced to deal with very powerful people, with no one to come to our aid in this snowy land.”

It had all been well and good in Gerube, a place full of people they could turn to for assistance. But out here, even the name of the Rowen Trading Guild held little sway.

“It's indeed an option to risk it and escape on Holo's back if things get dangerous, but if we're going to do that then Holo might as well have just transformed in the first place. And even she would rather avoid doing that if possible. She's a loyal friend, after all, who worries about others.”

“..”

Holo always spoke with Lawrence in a roundabout fashion, which complicated things and only hinted at her true feelings in such a way that it often led to misunderstandings. But he guessed that she spoke more frankly and directly with Cole.

Lawrence knew he was probably right, because despite having omitted key details and words in his speech, the boy seemed to understand what he was saying. Not only that, but Cole's face was filled with bitterness. That reaction made it clear that Holo had revealed a great deal to him about her true feelings.

If that was the case then Lawrence and Holo's interactions must have seemed incredibly childish to him, coming from two apparently mature people. Why not just be more honest with one another? If Cole made that suggestion to her, she'd undoubtedly roar with laughter.

“That's why, as long as it's what she wishes, I'm willing to take such risks. Because such tiny things are all I have the power to do.”

He paused and watched the ashes from the hay wafting in the warm air. He felt it was a bit too pretentious to say out loud, but in his head he felt like he was watching himself as he watched that hay.

“Didn't you tell me just now that, even though my hometown still exists, I can still console Holo?”

“Y-yes.”

“I still find that rather difficult. If she ends up asking me to help her found a new hometown, it'll bring me nothing but headaches. But even then..”

The fact that his right lip curled up on its own, and that he was determined to take any risk for Holo's sake, no matter the danger, was entirely for one reason.

“But even then, I'd do anything to keep from having to see her turn to someone else for help.”

He couldn't possibly have said those words if she was present, even if they came from his heart. Cole's facial expression froze in place, and no wonder. He surely didn't think he'd hear such a childish line from someone who wasn't that young anymore. In spite of that, Lawrence felt a strange, refreshing sensation rise in his chest and mix together with pride. He put on a joking tone.

“As such, I have my work cut out for me – I have to do everything I can so she forgets what it is Pisky does, so I can keep her affections, right?”

It seemed like a rather treacherous and self-serving thing to do, but it wasn't born from the same kind of desire he'd had in the past to pocket just one more silver coin. Back then, even confessing at a church wouldn't leave his heart this refreshed. On the contrary, he'd only have cunningly clung to the idea that he'd just been absolved by his confession.

But these were all things that only applied to him. His words were surely incredibly embarrassing to his audience's ears. And yet Cole reacted mildly; he simply turned his face away as if swallowing that embarrassment.

“Naturally, I wouldn't say such things in front of her. And besides, you seem to have the worst of it, always being battered around by our thoughts.”

Hearing this, Cole finally lifted his face and tried to say something. But he only managed to open his mouth slightly before his head fell back down again. Noticing his strange behavior, Lawrence was compelled to question him.

“What's the matter?”

Cole shrank his shoulders away in fright. He'd normally give a frank reply, but this time he only turned his face away again. Then, still facing away, he spoke softly.

“..I'm so sorry.”

“Sorry for what? Why would you want to apologize to-”

A crackle was heard from the coals in the stove, and some of its ashes were blown up into the air. Maybe that crackle was only in his head, or maybe it was the sound of his facial expression being frozen.

Cole had shrunk back into a little ball, with a look of extreme apology written on his face. Lawrence was beyond doubt as to what was going on. He covered his face with his hand and let his shoulders drop in defeat.

Everything he'd just said must have been overheard. Holo must have secretly taken some chance to relay orders to Cole after they left the reference hall. She'd probably enlisted him to create a situation where she could eavesdrop on Lawrence, and hear what his reaction would be when she said she wanted to be alone.

Every word he'd just spoken resurfaced clearly in his mind. But he made a snap decision to not run away, hoping to save what little face he had left. Before Cole even came to his senses, Lawrence had stood up, patted his hand, and stepped past him toward the door. That thin door offered no soundproofing, not that it would matter to Holo, who was also standing there with no intention to flee.

“It does indeed come as a surprise that you do not believe me to be a fragile female, only capable of wailing tears. But.. seriously.. even if *you* are unabashed by it, I the listener have become embarrassed for you.”

She spoke with a mischievous smile on her face. That self-important smile made Lawrence want to debate and refute her until she did break down in tears, wailing “say no more” in defeat. Lawrence had already lost count of how many times he’d been fooled by that smile on their journey. Each time it happened he felt angry, because she always engineered her pranks to best-emphasize his stupidity.

“You do not wish to see me go to another for help? Seriously, how can you possibly be so adorable, even now? You-”

She revealed her sharp fangs as she spoke, but just as she was about to press her index finger against his chest-

“..Nnn.. ah..!”

It was said that a person who bottled up their anger would eventually explode, but Lawrence's reaction was probably more accurately akin to that of a cornered dog. Holo instinctively shrank back in response, but immediately recovered her senses and began struggling, obviously wanting to escape in fear over how Cole would react.

But her strength was of course no match for Lawrence's in her human form. She calmed down after a while. Then, after some immeasurable amount of time had passed, Lawrence finally loosened his grip. The very instant he did, Holo took a deep breath and slapped him hard across the face. Based on how savage it was, he must have held her for quite a long time.

He staggered back, realizing that he was in no way a match for her. He didn't feel that way because she was too agile for him, but because she showed no signs of anger, even having slapped him. In fact, she wore a gentle expression he rarely got to see: a faint smile.

“I suppose that makes us even.”

Who was it, exactly, that set this trap for him in the first place? That's exactly what he would have asked, if her smile didn't show any sign that she was joking. But even though he desperately wanted to say something to get back at her he couldn't find any words to do so, because the smile his eyes beheld was genuine.

“..Yeah.”

She nodded contentedly at his response, and pushed him aside to enter the room.

“Young Cole, in celebration of our successful strategy, you shall have your reward.”

She pressed her cheek against the wide-eyed boy as she spoke, gently stroking his head. He was still a child, after all, so Lawrence was hardly surprised to see his face flush crimson. But who knew what traps Holo lay for him if she learned that. So he shut the door and walked back to the stove. Holo set her eyes on the fire in the stove as she hugged Cole from behind.

“I plan on departing as soon as tonight, perhaps tomorrow.”

“Huh?”

Cole gasped out in surprise, and tried to turn his head. But he seemed to realize that would only bring him face to face with her, so he opted to stop. She smiled softly and continued.

“Of course, the two of you will be departing with me. We shall return to that port town, Yiku or whatever it was, eat our fill of good food and drink, and go to sleep. You two should get some good sleep now, because it shall take us three days to return in this snow.”

Cole seemed to notice something odd about her declaration. But despite him showing a look of great confusion, Lawrence wasn't surprised in the slightest. He'd vaguely expected such an outcome, and had no objections if this is what she wanted to do.

“Having drunk too much, you two will sleep in until noon. And when you rise, all will be as it always has been. The three of us will share a meal together while leisurely discussing whether or not to return back over the ocean. And why will we do that?”

She coughed to keep herself from bursting into soft laughter, then wiped her mouth and continued.

“Because even if some terrible event happened two days prior at some distant monastery – an assault by a giant wolf, for instance – you two would be completely uninvolved. It is not as if anyone would connect you to such an incident, regardless. All you have to do is quietly and leisurely pass the time, with no danger ever crossing your path.”

She finally directed her gaze at Lawrence. He watched her, wondering when she'd finally reveal a smile and ask, “What say you?” She'd decided on a course of action that meant no risk to him, but of course she wasn't willing to leave empty-handed. As such, hers was the most logical and convenient method. It was just that simple.

“If that's what you've decided, then I have nothing to say. You've already heard that I won't mind.”

“Indeed. And since I have already confirmed your feelings, doubting you would mean that I am the one who is foolish.”

She would have looked cute if she'd said that with a shy smile on her face, but sadly it was a mischievous one. And yet it wouldn't have been her standing there if she'd reacted that way. A Holo without that edge would have been like a piece of jerky without its seasoning.

“I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. Those who behold me fear and serve me. That would all be for naught if I too showed fear.”

Even if her purpose for reverting to her true form was to protect someone, even the ones she was protecting might instinctively recoil in fear of her majesty. It didn't bear mentioning how fearsome she would seem when she acted for her own sake.

Naturally, Lawrence understood her concerns. But he still wished that she'd show some faith in him every once in a while.

“It would seem too suspicious for us to leave tonight. We should wait 'till tomorrow, or maybe the next day.”

“What say you, young Cole?”

She would only direct this question at Cole to tease him or hide her embarrassment. But he jumped in surprise, caught entirely off-guard by her question, before he hastily expressed his agreement.

“Then it is decided. Though this means you must forfeit your chance to make a profit, and I know not how to apologize.”

She placed her chin on Cole's shoulder as she said this. That attitude naturally disinclined him from giving her a sincere response. Of course he could manipulate the legend of the wolf-deity's bones to earn himself some profit, but tragedy often struck those who tried to profit more than their wallets could hold. A wallet was like a stomach: if one was too greedy, they could burst it and wind up dead.

“If you're really feeling so sorry, then just apologize.”

Since her flippant question had been given a frivolous answer, she revealed a gleeful smile.

“Please forgive me, will you not?”

The ridiculousness of it all made him burst into laughter. He shook his head with a sigh, thinking “what a peaceful day.” At the same time, however, he let his tongue slip in response.

“Just forget it. Being tricked like this every once in a while isn't *that* bad.”

It was a clear and bright afternoon. There no longer seemed to be a need for the stove to provide any warmth.



## Chapter 4

One had to be fully willing and mentally prepared before they set out into the snow. That was why merchants often lodged at inns in various towns for weeks on end every winter. Even familiar paths seemed like obscure foreign alleys when it snowed. Even worse, dangerous areas and harmless plains would become indistinguishable under a layer of snow.

Traveling in the winter required a guide, a sturdy horse undeterred by a bit of snow, and a prearranged lodge or cabin to travel to for the night. For longer journeys one also had to take care to prepare enough food and drinking water.

The one thing worth celebrating was that as long as demand existed, there would be a supplier. And this merchant-filled branch of the Brondel Monastery harbored travelers in every corner. Lawrence approached Pisky in the evening to arrange for the driver who had helped them come to the monastery.

A hint of surprise momentarily flashed across the still-writing Pisky's face upon hearing Lawrence's intention to leave. But it was quite natural for people to be more resolute about their departure times in the winter, and Lawrence had generously compensated him for his services as a guide, so Pisky quickly agreed.

He probably understood as well as anyone how quickly one would depart when a search for information yielded no results. After all, moving on to the next lead was infinitely preferable to wasting one's time moping around in disappointment.

Merchants always smilingly shook hands in welcome, even when they first met. And when the time came to bid farewell, they would likewise reveal a casual smile and wave goodbye. It was a rather forlorn way of doing things, but in a way it could also be comforting as well.

“With this, all the arrangements should be complete.”

“We're in your debt.”

“You're still being too polite. I wasn't of much help at all.”

The two of them didn't forget to exchange the usual meaningless, yet satisfying mercantile platitudes. But the handshake that followed their politeness did hold some meaning. A man's complexion hinted at his aptitude and bearing, and his hands hinted at the life he led.

Lawrence always decided how long he wanted to remember another's face based on the feeling of their handshake when bidding them farewell. As the two of them clasped their hands firmly, he made sure to remember Pisky's face well. He hoped Pisky would remember his as well, if

possible.

“I think we should be able to depart as early as tomorrow morning. But..”

“But?”

“A delivery from Winfield just arrived from the west, and apparently the weather there is extremely bad. Not only that, but the messenger who was supposed to arrive today hasn't made it yet either. It seems likely that a blizzard will strike us soon.”

Adding powerful winds to snow ensured that the entire landscape would be quickly painted white. Even the most skilled horse driver had his limits.

“Obviously we won't forcefully head out into a blizzard. Everyone knows there are three things never to pick a fight with: the Church, babies, and the weather.”

Pisky chuckled and nodded.

“If we're lucky it'll stray north. The shepherds will be back soon anyway, so I'll ask them when they're here. They know best what the situation is like outside.. oh, right, I almost forgot you're lodging in the shepherds' dormitory.”

“Indeed! We're in the most opportune place to gather information.”

Lawrence thanked Pisky again after his joke, then left the inn. Once outside, he noticed that the desolate dusk was indeed accentuated with more clouds than before, and every now and then a gust of wind would blow in his direction.

The merchants in the streets seemed to be quickening their pace, and it probably wasn't from the prospect of earning money, but from the desire for a hot meal. Since Lawrence had to abide by his own deal to prepare dinner for Huskins, and knew Holo was waiting there, he quickened his own pace back to the dormitory and began preparing dinner.

“A blizzard?”

Having watched the fire cook up the ingredients he tossed into the pot, Lawrence handed the ladle to Cole and spoke with Holo as she groomed her tail on the bed.

“Yeah, I just heard the weather's getting worse. If so then we'll be stuck here a little longer. Maybe two or three days..”

“Mm. Now that you mention it, it seems to be true. I have been surrounded by sheep lately, after all, so it seems that my nose has dulled.”

She sniffed the air a couple times before sneezing. Even humans who were accustomed to

travel sometimes became able to forecast the weather by smell.

“Ah, I suppose that departing a few days later will not make much difference at this point, will it?”

She bit the front tip of her tail and revealed her usual mischievous smile. Lawrence responded with his usual shoulder shrug. She giggled, stroked her tail one last time, and rose out of bed.

“Is dinner ready yet?”

“Not yet. Besides, we can’t eat before Mr. Huskins gets back.”

As usual, she skillfully concealed her fluffy tail under her robes with every step she took, but her hood wasn't pulled over her head right now. Lawrence trailed behind her as she coarsely reached her hand out to snatch a piece of dried mutton, then pulled her hood over her ears for her.

“Mph.. so when.. mph.. *is* that fellow coming back?”

“Should be anytime now. The moon's not out tonight, and it's really cold.”

In fact it was so cold that Cole had wrapped himself in a blanket as he stirred their dinner pot, and their words were accompanied by white wisps of air even inside the room. The outside wind was getting more and more intense, and all signs were indicating that there would indeed be a blizzard.

“Grr.. I am hungry.”

“Mr. Huskins is out there tending to the sheep you will be eating, so you should probably pay him some reverence.”

“Indeed, but when have you paid *me* any reverence?”

Lawrence wanted very badly to refute her with a “When have I ever been in your care?” But regretfully he wasn't in a position to be able to.

“Jeez..”

A low-key expression of his displeasure was the best he could do. At that point her gaze suddenly turned to the door. That could only mean they had company, but given her alertness it definitely wasn't Huskins.

Could it be Pisky? As Lawrence wondered if it was, he heard knocking at the door. Cole was so accustomed to doing the mundane tasks that he instinctively opened the door to reveal a shepherd leaning on a cane.

“Oh~ smells delicious.. Looks like Huskins took in some really nice travelers.”

The shepherd seemed to recognize Cole, and patted him on the head before continuing with a cough.

“Pardon my intrusion. Huskins seems to plan on spending the night out in the farmhouse. It's already snowing hard outside, and my two companions and I barely managed to make it back in time.”

“I see.. thank you for going out of your way to tell us.”

“You're welcome. It's extremely tedious waiting for someone, not knowing when he'll return.”

Those words carried more weight coming from the mouth of a shepherd making his living in this snowy land. Indeed, one often couldn't even tell if his companions were dead or alive. When snow and darkness descended from the heavens, all people could do was huddle around a fire and wait.

“Besides, having to wait around with such fine food ready to eat would be unbearable.”

The shepherd roared in laughter after saying this, then raised a hand in farewell.

“That's all I came to say.”

He then walked off. A merchant would have taken the chance to request a bowl of hot soup, but it seemed that shepherds weren't as petty. All they had to rely on in those expansive fields of grass was their staff and their dog. Such solitude surely accounted for their immense sense of pride. In fact, their attitude was a bit similar to a wolf's. If Holo knew he was thinking that, she'd surely be enraged.

“Well, if that's how it is we're stuck waiting until the day after tomorrow. Hopefully the harbor won't have frozen over, at least..”

Lawrence closed the door as he spoke, then turned around to see Holo snatching the ladle from Cole's hand.

“Aye. I hope this pot of soup does not freeze over either.”

Judging by how pleased she seemed now, she wasn't very fond of Huskins. But her joy was probably due in large part to having one less person to share the meat with.

“That hasn't even properly cooked through yet, has it?”

Lawrence added some not-so-inexpensive firewood to the stove as he asked.

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That night, Cole had long been asleep when Holo finally began to snore. The wind blew intensely against their shuttered window. It wasn't only their window, all the windows in the building were clattering endlessly. The occasional bark from a sheepdog mixed in; it seemed the dogs had sensed the frightening atmosphere.

It was a typical night before a blizzard. On such nights in the past, Lawrence had trouble sleeping no matter how tightly he clung to his covers. But tonight was different. It was downright hot being under the covers. It was in part due to the fact that he had Holo's tail for warmth, but more importantly he also had another person's body warmth - the best defense against the cold.

Her body temperature was usually already a bit on the high side, like a child's, and it was only further increased by the liquor she ingested. And so, even if a bone-chilling cold would bite his face if he popped it out from under the covers, it was warm as spring underneath them.

Despite this he still couldn't sleep, but there was a good reason for that. This adventure had made him realize that his power alone wasn't enough to solve all of Holo's problems. And more importantly, he was frustrated over how to plan the future.

If Holo reverted to her wolf form, this incident would end whether the bones existed or not. If they did then this adventure would naturally be over, but it might end even if they weren't. No monk could lie if Holo's jaws were around his head demanding to know where the bones were. But if they answered that the monastery hadn't bought them, or had already resold them, would they be able to continue chasing after the bones?

What if the bones were back in the south? Traveling there wasn't difficult, but it would mean not only spending even more of his savings, but also giving up on the business opportunities he'd spent so long working into his routine, one by one. If he put his business on hold for too long it would be a massive inconvenience for them to even buy everyday necessities, and he would also lose the reputation he'd worked so hard to build.

Even if he wanted to keep detouring, there were limits to how far he could actually go. As much as he wanted to keep up this dramatic, thrilling, risky journey with Holo, he was just like this monastery: he couldn't escape the financial realities necessary for him to keep on living. He could only accompany Holo as long as his abilities permitted him to do so.

Of course she understood his circumstances, but as soon as the idea of taking no further detours and going straight to Yoitsu surfaced in his mind, he lost any chance of being able to sleep. If they headed directly there, how much longer could he spend with Holo? He counted the time off on his fingers as he stared up at the ceiling.

The real question was what they would do once they reached Yoitsu. Like dough with yeast in it, their evasion of that question had only made it loom larger and larger. He didn't know her thoughts on the issue, but he could at least confidently say that Holo harbored positive feelings for him.

Alas, neither of them were children. They understood that not everything would play out according to their desires. They had to make some kind of decision sooner or later. Even if they were both human, a love that crossed social classes was already bad enough to cause an outrage. But she was the Wisewolf of Yoitsu and he was just an ordinary traveling merchant.. how great would their determination have to be?

He rested a hand on her beautiful flaxen hair as she slept next to him. Once she fell asleep from alcohol, she wouldn't wake up even if her cheeks were pinched. Besides, he made the effort to carry her to bed, so he'd earned at least this much in reward.

“..”

Her hair slowly slipped through his fingers like strands of silk. He was madly in love with her. If possible, he wished to be beside her until they had to part, no matter how much humiliation he had to suffer or how foolish he appeared.

He knew how reckless that was, but he still planned on doing it. And yet, mere moments after the thought crossed his mind a calm voice in his head spoke, asking “Are you fully prepared to make such a commitment?”

He sighed, and stopped stroking her head. It was such a difficult question that he wanted to consult the Wisewolf for an answer, despite knowing it was something he had to figure out on his own. He resisted the urge to foolishly shout “Damn it,” and looked at her once more. The look on his face had to be pitiful beyond belief. He was about to use that as an excuse to bury his face in her hair when-

“!”

He froze in his tracks, but not because Holo had stopped snoring or was laughing at him under the covers. He thought he heard a noise, like something was being dragged around.

“..?”

Holo continued sleeping soundly with her face obscured by the blanket and a defenseless snore rising up from underneath. He listened intently for a while, but only heard the shutters flapping around and the wind outside.

Just as he relaxed, thinking it was just snow sliding off the roof, he heard the noise again. It definitely wasn't his imagination. He lifted his head and listened, and as he turned his head to

the side he heard the noise yet again. The sound was real.

He slowly breathed in, letting the frigid air flow into him. He then immediately hopped out of bed, set both feet on the creaking floorboards, and stood up in the freezing cold which cut him like knives. He unsheathed his knife and clenched his right fist repeatedly.

He was preparing himself because thieves were unexpectedly common in such places. Most people out here would assume that only those they were familiar with would bother showing up here, and thieves preyed on that unguarded attitude.

He opened the door to the room with the stove, and the dragging sounds became even clearer. No, they sounded like footsteps.. footsteps, and the scraping of some hard object. It was the sound of someone walking with a staff. They were being far too careless for a thief, and Lawrence wasn't dumb enough to mistake the sound for a thief tiptoeing in the night. Who could it be at such a late hour?

“..Nnnn.. ugh..”

Holo turned over in bed to discover that Lawrence was no longer there. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, throwing a questioning glance in his direction. But her uncharacteristically immature display didn't last long. She immediately noticed the footsteps and her eyes became those of a wolf's. She climbed out of the covers so quickly it was impossible to tell that she was drunk, but her body was still no match for the cold and she shivered once.

The footsteps were getting quite near. Sssh.. thump.. creak. Holo looked at the door and then at Lawrence. She clearly wanted to inquire who their midnight visitor was, but Lawrence didn't know any more than she did. The footsteps halted in front of the door, then someone reached out to turn the knob.

The door slowly opened.

“..Hu–”

Lawrence didn't have time to finish his sentence. He rushed toward the figure, to catch it before it fell over. It was covered with snow, apparently having arrived with much effort. It seemed to have the form of Huskins, but it wasn't human. Lawrence was speechless.

“..”

The unknown creature before him had icicles dangling from its eyebrows, and he couldn't tell if that was a beard around its mouth or just more icicles. The hand clutching the staff was frozen under snow such that it was impossible to know where the staff ended and the hand began.

The creature was breathing very quietly.. so quietly, in fact, that it was a bit unsettling. Its eyes,

buried in ice, gleaming with a piercing glow. Everyone was silent. This visitor was almost demonic, with an oddly hunched back, a head with sharp, coiled horns growing out of it, and crooked, goat-like knees.

“Dear god..”

The moment Lawrence instinctively murmured that, they heard the ice crack and fall off the demon's face. By the time Lawrence realized the demon was smiling, Holo was already at his side.

“..So you were a wolf..”

Each time its lips moved, the icicles dangling from its beard rattled clearly against each other. It was Huskins' voice.

“Did you not even have the time to disguise yourself?”

“..”

He silently smiled, and slowly wiped his face with his free hand. A normal person would have died if they'd gone through what Huskins just had.

“Are you here to mock me?”

Holo's spoke more coldly than the air that surrounded them. The half-demon named Huskins squinted as if she had pricked him in the eyes, then hobbled to his feet. Lawrence reflexively reached out to support his shoulder.

What was before their eyes was a demon. It was a demon no matter how one looked at it. But Lawrence was obligated to support this demon, because Holo hadn't made any attempt to conceal her ears or tail.

“..Before a wolf.. a sheep should naturally hide itself.. isn't that right?”

Every move Huskins made was accompanied by the sound of ice crackling somewhere. Lawrence supported Huskins and walked him to the stove, letting him sit down. As he did they heard a gasp. Cole had awakened, and inhaled sharply.

“As the old adage says, it is best to hide a tree in a forest. I did not even notice.”

“..I am different from you.”

Huskins watched Holo with one eye. Given her expression and her tail's response, his words had clearly angered her. Even so, she had the capacity within her to admit the truth. She nodded and grudgingly spoke.

“So what?”

Huskins and Holo were similar beings, and Lawrence didn't have a problem with that. This journey had taught him that their kind often kept a low profile by mixing in with humans. They lived in forests near towns where numerous dark rumors circulated, or in isolated districts where townspeople feared to tread, or tending fields of wheat even after people no longer had faith in them. As such his heart was even calmer than Holo's, as they waited for Huskins to reply.

“I have.. a request.”

“A request?”

The room was so cold that even the ice that was melting off of Huskins was freezing up once more. He purposely gave an exaggerated nod and the words that he spoke next came out of his mouth like a sigh.

“It's a disaster.. a situation that my power alone can no longer deal with.”

“So you wish to borrow my power?”

Huskins nodded at Holo's words, but Lawrence soon realized that it wasn't really a nod, but that Huskins was laughing. His shivering hands then pulled a letter out from under his shirt.

“Your strength lies in sharp fangs and claws.. but the era in which such things ruled supreme is over. That's why I wish to give this to..”

Huskins turned his eyes to Lawrence.

“To *me*?”

“Indeed.. I wish to give this to the human who travels with the wolf. My purpose in letting you stay here was.. to observe you. I believe this was the will of the gods.”

“Ha! The gods?”

Holo laughed and bared her sharp fangs as she spoke. Her threatening and belittling expression only earned a cold smile from Huskins.

“Just as you cling so closely to this.. unusually kindhearted human, I cling closely to my gods.. that is all..”

“I-I do.. do not..”

Holo desperately tried to refute him, but in her unusually flustered state she found herself unable to say a thing. The difference between her and Huskins seemed like that between a child and an old man, and not just from appearances.

Huskins watched the speechless Holo, but didn't reveal the proud smile of one who had bested an opponent. That reaction revealed the difference between them. He managed to reveal a look showing both kindness and sympathy toward Holo, without making any expression at all.

“You're a merchant, aren't you? Please take a look at this..”

“This is..?”

“Such incidents happen frequently.. I was searching for a lost sheep in the snowstorm.. when the sheepdog accompanying me discovered a man. He was under heavy snow, posed as if praying to the gods, but his spirit had already left him.”

It was a sealed letter, though the red sealing wax on its sheepskin envelope had already been broken. If the man had perished in the snow he must have been a messenger who'd lost his way traveling here from another town.

Going slowly would cause one to get snowed over, but quickening one's pace would rapidly deplete stamina. People inevitably fell victim to this tragedy, and there would always be good-for-nothing opportunists to steal the possessions off their unfortunate corpses once the snow had melted.

“I am but a sheep, after all.. young wolf, you understand my meaning, don't you?”

Huskins steered the topic to Holo. She grabbed her chest tightly, as if some secret of hers had been revealed.

“In the face of this thin piece of paper, our strength means nothing..”

Having said this, Huskins slowly exhaled and closed his eyes. The flames in the stove had already spread to the freshly-added firewood, and were burning brightly. The ice encasing Huskins was finally beginning to melt. Cole, having returned to his senses, was carefully tending to Huskins, who seemed quite comfortable in the boy's care.

Huskins had already reverted to his human form, though that had somehow escaped their notice. His earlier demonic form seemed almost like a dream now. Yet Holo's wolf ears and elusive tail were still plainly visible, as she stood above Huskins and looked down on him. Lawrence opened the letter Huskins had given to him and checked the seal. It then dawned on him why Huskins had said his strength meant nothing.

“Mr. Huskins. You said you wished to borrow my strength, but.. what is it exactly that you want

me to do?”

“..I wish for you to protect..”

“..”

Lawrence was rendered speechless. For his part, Huskins closed his eyes and spoke with a faint smile.

“That’s right. To protect the monastery.”

“I’m.. sorry, but why would you want to do that?”

Huskins opened one eyelid and focused the gray eyeball under it on Lawrence. He looked as dignified as a wild sheep on the untamed plains, taking one proud step after the other. The power he possessed was different from Holo's. She could be described as a sharp unsheathed blade and he a giant metal hammer.

“It's no wonder you would react that way. You must be confused as to why I would relinquish myself to the gods.. you see, I have allowed myself to rely on humans all along, just like the young wolf next to you.”

Despite wanting to refute him, Holo was stopped by his gaze. He practically stared her down like a child.

“I have no intention of incurring your wrath. We live our lives from day to day in the form of humans, so it is only natural for us to look to them to lend us strength.”

“Hmph.. what have you done, then, with this strength you have borrowed from them?”

“Built a home.”

“What?”

Her eyes widened. Huskins clearly and calmly continued with the same tone and manner.

“We have built a home. On this land. A home that belongs to us.”

The burning firewood crackled. Holo's eyes were as round as full moons.

“Nothing escapes the hands of humans. Not mountains, forests or plains. As such, in order to establish a peaceful place that will not change over mere centuries, but will stand forever, we must rely on human hands as well. We were also worried at first about whether we could accomplish that goal.. but ultimately we prevailed. We built a peaceful place. One where anyone who returned, no matter how long after, would always say-”

“-It’s good to see this place hasn't changed.”

Huskins smiled gently like a kindly grandfather, and took a deep breath.

“That had always been our solemn dream. Long ago, our kind was expelled from our original homeland and scattered. Some of us traveled to barren wastelands, others to town in the form of humans. Some of my companions even embarked on endless journeys. But the place where we can reunite, no matter how separated we are at the moment, is right here.”

“You say your kind was scattered.. could it have been the Moon-Hunting-”

“Haha.. ha! So you know that much.. then explaining will be even easier. Indeed, it was the Moon-Hunting Bear who took our home from us, or Irawa Weir Muheddhunde in the ancient tongue.”

Lawrence recalled the numerous ancient legends collected by a monk, which he had read in a remote village worshipping a snake god. Holo took a deep breath, like a child trying to hold back tears.

“When disaster struck, our kind had little strength to resist. The times have now changed. To protect this place we must rely on a new kind of strength. The structures built by men are too intricate, and my hooves too unrefined..”

When seeking one's favor, keeping on equal ground while coming across as neither too assertive nor humble was extremely difficult. As was possessing tremendous pride without being overbearing. But Huskings accepted everything as it was, and did what he could in the given circumstances. He must have lived this way for centuries. That was precisely why he possessed such dignity.

“We’ve encountered many difficulties in the past as well, but the problem we face this time may already be beyond our power to solve.”

After a quick glance over the letter, Lawrence turned his eyes to Huskings.

“The King's.. decreed a tax, hasn't he?”

“These difficulties may actually have been more easily resolved.. during the long period of conflict before this country was founded. Putting forth logical arguments for peace may have ended those warring times, but by then the wars may have laid waste to the land and collapsed this monastery, leaving us with nothing. Thus.. I secretly aided Winfield the First in his unification of this country. If I had to name my greatest mistake, that would probably be it.”

They were an existence stronger and smarter than humans, who ruled the earth before it fell

into human hands. That these existences would fall victim to betrayal over the endless cycles of change was probably just the natural order of things.

“If even sons and daughters cannot remember the debt they owe their parents, then grandchildren will remember it far less so. I can no longer stand on the public stage. At best, I can show myself every now and then, and attempt to reinforce their authority.”

“The legend of.. the Golden Sheep..”

“Correct. That said, a few of those sightings were accidents resulting from my carelessness when I greeted companions I had not seen for a great length of time.”

Saying a hard-to-laugh-at joke when it was already hard to laugh was sometimes what tipped the scales to laughter. But after the wave of laughter subsided, all that would remain was conspicuous nervousness.

“I have no knack for counting money, yet it is no secret to me that the monastery is on the verge of bankruptcy. Each time a tax is decreed, our pay is delayed. Some of the merchants we are on good terms with have even told us this monastery cannot survive another such tax.”

“But, something like this..”

“I no longer know what I can do. If it was something I could trample flat with my hooves, or scrape away with my teeth, I would happily do so. You are a merchant, yes? When humans force our companions out of the forests or mountains, merchants are always seen lurking in the shadows. So to see one possessing such power chatting so intimately with a wolf.. of course we can only rely on-”

Huskins let out an incredibly long sigh and ended his sentence.

“Of course we can only rely on you.”

“But-”

“Please.”

Lawrence had already spent seven years traveling alone. He had more than once honored a dying companion's request to deliver a message to his family. Seeing this dreaded scenario unfold once more in front of his eyes made him fall silent. A normal letter he could accept. But this was the King's tax decree.

“No.”

Lawrence was standing there unable to speak; it was Holo who first opened her mouth.

“No. We cannot take such a risk.”

“Holo..”

“If it is something you cannot do then just be honest and say you cannot do it. Did you not already decide that your involvement here would be dangerous? We are leaving tomorrow, and if not, then the day after. We are travelers, and this place has nothing to do with us.”

Her quick, shallow breathing was all that was heard after her verbal onslaught. If she'd spoken those words with a frown, Lawrence might have grown angry. But it wasn't anger that made him stand up expressionlessly and leave Cole to tend to Huskins alone. Holo shrank back as he did, having come back to her senses.

The look on her face was difficult to describe. Her pursed lips seemed angry, yet also seemed to be trembling with sadness. Her shoulders sank in, her fists were tightly clenched, and her face was deadly pale. He couldn't bear to see her like this. He knew she was reacting this way out of jealousy.

“What-what is it? You.. am I wrong? You said it would be dangerous, so I suggested leaving. And now you are thinking about accepting that man's request—”

“Holo.”

He took her hand as he said her name. She struggled a few times before growing silent. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She knew deep down that her words had been childish. She was able to bear Pisky's building of a new home for humans, but if it was Huskins who would benefit it was a different matter altogether. And the one responsible for the destruction of Huskins' home and her own was the same Moon-Hunting Bear.

“Young wolf..”

Huskins spoke.

“Your home was destroyed by him as well, wasn't it?”

The look in her eyes was a chaotic mixture of jealousy, envy and apprehension as she stared at him.

“Building a new home for ourselves wasn't easy. We assumed human form, doing our best to not bring attention to ourselves and not be remembered, and disguised ourselves as shepherds to this day. We decided long ago that in order to protect this place, we would be willing to pay any price.”

“I can do that too!”

She cried out in anger, but her voice sounded terribly weak. It then turned hoarse, leaving her unable to say anything clearly.

“If I ever manage to find.. my home.. Yoitsu.. I can.. too..”

“From your reaction I suspect you’ve never battled the bear before, have you? Are you saying you have the resolve to put your life on the line in a duel to the death with the bear?”

Her expression turned to rage. She must have thought Huskins was looking down on her. But even in the face of that fury, Huskins remained perfectly calm and composed, staring into her amber-red eyes.

“When it came to my home, I ran. I ran like there was no tomorrow, because I too had companions who needed my protection. I desperately led them to escape. The memory of that night is burned into my mind to this day, of the enormous full moon hanging in the sky, brightly revealing the profile of the mountains beyond the plains. We fled in terror to get away from the fertile plains upon which we had always grazed.”

Huskins seemed to grow even frailer. Perhaps assuming a human form subjected him to human limitations, just like Holo. In spite of that appearance he continued speaking without pausing, as if the flames of the stove had melted all the memories frozen deep inside his heart.

“As we ran, I turned my head toward my home, and then I saw it. I saw the form of that giant bear, whose enormous body could easily have seated itself in the outline of the mountains.. it was an eerily beautiful sight. Even now, I still think that. It let out a roar, and raised a claw up as if to grab the moon. I cannot forget that moment, even to this day..”

It was something that happened in a bygone age, far before the age of man. Back then the world had been wrapped in shadows and ruled by spirits.

“These days everything has become a source of nostalgia. That giant bear was the last ruler of our time, a time when strength and a powerful body reigned supreme. Today, even my hatred has burned out, leaving behind only nostalgia..”

For Holo, who hadn't been able to fight for her own home, and learned centuries later that it had been destroyed, the best she could manage was squeezing out a childish smile.

“You-you fled in fear, and actually have the nerve to speak of determination. How laughable!”

She responded like a beaten child. But the aged Huskins countered her with ease.

“In order to live in the human world, I've even started eating meat. For centuries now.”

“I”

Her head spun toward the meat drying from the leather rope. What kind of meat was that? And what was the meat they ate with Huskins during their meals? After a few short, hurried breaths she threw up.

Lawrence had no idea if she wanted to cry, or pictured herself doing what Huskins had done. Huskins would even eat mutton in order to play the part of a shepherd, and act as if there was nothing to it. Could she do the same?

“I have sacrificed much to keep this place over the years, and crossed boundaries that shouldn't be crossed. If we lose this place, we may never again find another in which we can live in peace.”

He didn't sound like he was blaming Holo, but rather being perfectly honest about his motives for borrowing Lawrence's strength. But Holo couldn't help being jealous that he'd managed to build a new home here.

She knew it was capricious and foolish to feel that way about someone who'd worked hard and rebuilt what he'd lost. And she knew she was planning to abandon someone who only wanted to protect his new home. If she felt like he was blaming her, it would only be her own guilt weighing down on her.

Her reason struggled with her emotions, and she ultimately chose to run. Like a child she burst into sobs and collapsed to the floor, her hand in Lawrence's. Huskins waited until Lawrence put his arms around her shoulders before he continued.

“That young wolf you now hold must have suffered many painful memories in this world as well. And after accumulating some incredible amount of luck, she finally found herself traveling with a kindhearted human. I can understand her unwillingness to part with this fortune, as well as the feelings she wishes to protect. But still-”

Huskins slowly closed his eyes.

“I don't wish to give up on this place, either. This hard-earned.. land of peace.. but..”

Cole noticed Huskins' pause and hastily pressed his hand against his broad chest. Seeing the boy exhale in relief made it clear that Huskins wasn't in too weak a condition, and was simply out of energy.

Lawrence listened to the crackling firewood and Holo's sobbing, once again shifting his gaze to the tax decree Huskins had brought with him. Judging from its details, it was an order that the monastery would find difficult to deny.

The best way to avoid paying taxes was to declare that one had no fortune with which to pay them, but the method of taxation that the King had chosen was basically an ultimatum that

made it useless to try to hide the truth.

It wasn't difficult to see how determined the King was, and that any attempts to evade the decree would be futile. He would probably send his army at the slightest sign of hesitation. Perhaps he'd even planned on doing so from the start.

Holo had mentioned before that if a clan had two leaders, they were bound to not get along. The same logic applied to ruling a country. The monastery had vast tracts of land and great power. That kind of existence was bound to be a nuisance to the King.



It would be their downfall whether they paid the tax or not. It was necessary to save them from this hopeless situation. And it was up to Lawrence, a mere traveling merchant, to do so.

“This is impossible..”

After hearing those words slip from Lawrence's tongue, Cole lifted his head and responded.

“Is it?”

He had daringly stepped out of the safety of his own hometown for the sake of protecting it. His eyes were now even more determined than usual, and looked at Lawrence almost as if blaming him.

“..There was an accident halfway through one of my journeys. The road was covered in mud, from the rain of the previous day.”

Lawrence's abrupt and nonsensical change in topics made a rare look of rage surface on Cole's face. He was a merchant, and merchants loved to use treacherous logic in their battles.. that's exactly what the look on the boy's face was saying.

“The lead cart suddenly sank into the mud. We hurried ahead, and found that the merchant driving that cart had fortunately survived. He appeared quite embarrassed as he lay face-up on the ground. He was injured, but should be alright.. at least that's what we thought, until we tried to lift him up. Only then did we discover..”

He continued stroking Holo's back as she continued to sob, and turned to Cole before continuing to talk.

“..the large hole in his belly. A tree branch had broken off inside of him, and he himself hadn't even noticed it until he saw the looks on our faces. He smiled stiffly and begged us to save him, but we weren't gods. All we could do was keep him company for his final minutes, and send him off.”

There were things in this world that no one had the power to change. It was just the natural order of things. Lawrence sighed and continued.

“Of course we pitied him. I too am aware of the God who is supposed to help us, yet never around when we need him. That's why I simply told myself, 'Lucky for me, I wasn't the one beset by misfortune today.'”

“That's too..”

“It's only natural. After sending off the unfortunate one, I would have to stand up again and resume my journey. At that point, all I could do was take whatever goods from his cart I could

carry.”

One corner of Lawrence's mouth curled up.

“And I couldn't forget to let myself say, 'What a nice profit.'”

Cole's face twitched as if he was trying to squeeze words out from deep within his throat, but couldn't. He lowered his head and carried on wiping away the icy moisture from Huskins' hair and beard.

When one was faced with circumstances that were difficult to bear, but unalterable, then burying their head in their present tasks would at least offer some slight degree of relief. Lawrence didn't remember how long ago he'd come to learn this truth.

He scooped Holo up as he wondered about that. She'd quieted down in his embrace, having either cried herself to sleep or passed out from her intense emotions, and so he carried her to their room. The wind and snow raged on outside, but the cracks in the walls and windows were now packed with snow, so it wasn't as cold inside as it had been earlier.

Holo's breathing was short and shallow, as if she was suffering from a fever. She might have been having a nightmare. If not, maybe it was her conscience rendering her unable to breath easily. After laying her in bed, his thoughts turned to caring for Huskins.

But as he prepared to leave her side, she grabbed his sleeve, opened her eyes slightly, and abandoned all of her pride, embarrassment, and everything else, and used those eyes to beg him to stay with her. He wasn't sure if she was truly awake, but he still stroked her head with his free hand until she closed her eyes, apparently comforted.

Shortly after that he slowly peeled her fingers off his sleeve, one by one. In the light of the adjacent room's stove, Cole was devoting himself to removing Huskins' outer garments. Not only was Huskins significantly heavier, but Cole wasn't very strong to begin with. When Lawrence reached out to assist, the boy didn't thank him, but also didn't refuse his help.

“There won't be any danger in thinking it over, at least.”

In his happy surprise, Cole said nothing more. He raised his face and stopped what he was doing.

“Pull that end a little.”

“Ah! Right, right!”

“Just considering the possibilities should be safe, because right now it's only we who know the contents of that letter.”

The two of them found some dry clothes for Huskins tucked away in one corner of his room, and removed his soggy shoes.

“Considering how important that letter is, I doubt it's the only copy they've sent. When the storm's lifted I'm sure others will arrive to ensure it gets delivered. That means we still have a few options.”

Should they tell anyone else about the situation? And if so, whom?

“Can the monastery be saved?”

“I can't say. But we can predict what'll happen. They've already been forced into a corner, and so has the King. Assuming they're down to their last resorts, they must be close to making a final decision. And they're not the only ones involved, there's also the Ruvik Alliance.”

Cole held his breath in full attention, then timidly asked a question.

“Should we be disregarding Miss Holo?”

Certain key questions were like wounds; if touched, one would either groan or fly into a rage. Lawrence was the type who would do the former.

“..She must find this whole thing unbearable, and not want to accept the facts so easily. She would only have said what she did if she couldn't find a resolution in her mind. But as long as the situation allows it, she'll be willing to help. Don't be fooled by her usual demeanor, she can be quite kindhearted at times. Oh, and just so you know, that's where you're supposed to act surprised.”

As Lawrence spoke, Cole wrapped cloth around his feet to keep from getting frostbite, and added more wood to the stove. When he heard Lawrence's final sentence, his tired face finally broke into a smile.

“That girl knows how ugly her jealous heart is. After seeing Huskins' determination, she must feel like a total child, and her Wisewolf pride must have suffered a heavy blow.”

When it came to bring proud and acting out of emotion, Holo was second to none. But she still understood when it was time to joke around and when it was time to be serious. When she got serious, even Lawrence had to bow down to her.

“I once told her something.”

“What's that?”

“I told her that there are many ways to solve a given problem, but once it's solved we still have to carry on with our lives. So rather than taking the easiest route, it's best to pick the one that

will lead to a future where we can live in comfort and peace.”

Cole wrapped Huskins' entire body in a blanket to shield him from the cold draft. He then wrapped a piece of firewood in fabric and put it under his head like a cushion, completing their care for the old man.

“She heard me say that and replied “foolish mule” with a look of surrender. But if she brushes Huskins off.. do you think she'll be able to carry on with a clear conscience?”

Cole must have imagined that she would simply stuff her face with food and liquor in order to fall into a lazy, sound sleep like a puppy or kitten. Turning down the request of someone who'd suffered many hardships, and was on the verge of losing their second home, which they had built – Lawrence couldn't see her being so carefree after doing such a thing. Cole also shook his head twice, resolutely.

“And I think your own position's even more readily apparent.”

Lawrence smiled when he saw Cole lower his head in embarrassment, his face rigid, as if he'd laid the contents of his soul bare for all to see. Even if Lawrence and Holo abandoned Huskins, he would not.

“That being said, everything I've said so far has been from our own perspective.”

“So far?”

Even if he wasn't Holo, seeing the dumb look on Cole's face made Lawrence want to hug the boy. It was so easy to act confidently and proudly in front of him.

“I'm a merchant, after all. I wouldn't act if there wasn't any profit in it.”

“..Then you mean..”

“The key is this tax decree. If we can believe Huskins' words and Pisky's judgment, this decree will wipe away all that the monastery has. So it turns out that it's actually the perfect opportunity for us. I hear that just before a huge wave, the tide will completely recede and reveal the ocean's floor.. what do you think that means?”

Cole immediately replied.

“That all the treasure chests at the bottom of the ocean are revealed too, right?”

“Exactly. So if there really are treasures down there, the monastery won't be able to hide them from us.. which should help Holo accomplish her goal. Of course, whether she chooses to take one of them by force will be entirely up to her.”

Cole nodded and breathed a sigh of relief before he seated himself.

“I can’t fathom how you’re this skilled, Mr. Lawrence.”

Cole probably meant his ability to look at things from so many perspectives. Lawrence just quietly smiled and shrugged his shoulders, but it wasn’t an act. If Holo was there she’d surely be able to tell that. After all, no one was really able to lie to themselves.

“We still have a long night ahead of us, and a fire’s been conveniently raised as well. Cole..”

“Yes?”

“I will require your wisdom.”

“Right!”

Cole hastily covered his mouth, having shouted that out a little too loudly. Lawrence immediately pulled out paper and pen and began to formulate a plan.

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Just seeing an insect’s beating wings was difficult, but even the individual beats of a powerfully-built eagle’s wings could be counted. Smaller organization’s actions were likewise harder to predict with accuracy than those of larger ones. If that organization was cornered as well, such predictions were easier still.

But they had too little information. All they currently knew was that the monastery was in a financial and political crisis, and that the failures of the King’s policies had led his own treasury to financial crisis. They also knew about the King’s decree, and the prediction that the monastery couldn’t survive another tax.

They still didn’t know which special piece of property the monastery was hiding. Did they truly have a high-priced holy relic like the wolf deity’s bones, as Lawrence and company predicted, or was it just a large sum of cash?

These were the facts he had scrawled onto the top half of the page, and the lower half was reserved for the choices that were available to him and his companions. They could inform others about the decree.. but who? The alliance? The monastery? Perhaps they would be better off remaining silent. There were also many ways in which they could handle intelligence about the bones.

The options available to them seemed both too few and too many, and the same applied to what they didn’t know. Even if they knew, the monastery’s crisis was such that they couldn’t survive another tax, they didn’t know if they would stubbornly resist one or submit to the King’s

army like obedient lambs.

But practically speaking, there was no possibility for the monastery to solve its own problems with its own power. Their only viable option right now seemed to be cleverly trading information with the alliance while gradually taking small steps forward. Such a strategy was naturally dangerous, but it wasn't altogether hopeless.

After all, the alliance might have them by the throat and be wondering how to tear that throat out, but they weren't like a band of mercenaries, intent on feeding on their prey until nothing remained. The alliance knew how to harvest wheat, and how to increase harvest yields. They also knew that a large one-time profit wasn't as important as a smaller, more sustainable income. On top of that, they needed to ensure that the land they won was stable enough for a successful migration. The monastery's continued existence was an extremely high priority for them.

Lawrence and Cole spent the whole night considering every possibility they could think of, and whether each was worth the gamble. Perhaps it was the blizzard and the cold before dawn that helped keep their minds clear, but it also helped that Lawrence was an independent merchant with a solid grasp of worldly power relationships, and that Cole was there to help keep him on track.

By the time the bright flames in the stove had died down to silent, low-burning ones, the two of them had finally conceived of the best, essentially flawless, choice and had committed it to paper. Holo's happy expression and Huskins' look of surprise were right there before his eyes. The strategy was to-

“..Nng..”

Just as he was proudly revealing his conclusion to Holo, he woke up. The similar sounds of a burning fire and falling snow crackled as he made a groggy estimation of how long he must have slept. Now he just had to remember that flawless plan he had grasped before falling asleep. Oh, of course.. his heart sank as he realized it was just a dream. He might have been able to stomach that realization if it wasn't also plainly written on his face that he'd only found the answer in his dreams.

“Foolish mule.”

He'd been sleeping face-down over the crate he'd been writing on. Holo threw her comment at him just as he sat up, while she crouched next to the stove. Her voice was clearer and more pleasant than the ringing of a church bell. He felt a terrible knot in his neck as he gave a mighty stretch, and attributed it to his clumsy sleeping posture.

“Truly such a foolish mule..”

He finally noticed that two blankets had been draped over his shoulders, and that Cole was curled up into a tiny ball next to Holo. Her face was turned away as she continued calling him a foolish mule over and over. It looked like Cole was desperately clinging onto her tail and refusing to let go.

Maybe it was the result of her face returning to normal after swelling with tears, or maybe it was just an illusive contrast against her thin dress without her robes, but her face seemed quite emaciated. Actually, she seemed emaciated in general, not just her face. By the time that struck him she sighed.

“I am so happy,”

Despite her words not matching her expression, they seemed to be more heartfelt and true than when she praised a deliciously greasy chunk of mutton.

“..Despite there being so many things that do not happen the way we wish them to.”

Cole's mouth was half open and his breathing was inaudible rather than being a gentle snore. Without looking closer one might think he was dead. But his head shrank in as if ticklish when Holo gently stroked his neck.

“The gods tell us to share with others.”

“Even if what we are to share is our good fortune?”

She asked that as if her interest had been destroyed. It was such a cold response it feel like a not-quite-appropriate reply would only earn him a cold sigh and an unwillingness from her to ever speak with him again.

“Even our good fortune. Personally, I think I've managed to do so.”

“..”

“I even share the comfort of your tail with the boy.”

A look of defeat crossed her face when she heard him say those words so grimly. With the faint trace of a smile at the corners of her lips, she quickly moved over to the window.

“I feel as if my body is burning up, as if I were being consumed by flames.”

“Because of-”

He wanted to jokingly say, “Because of what I just said,” but he couldn't muster the courage to do so. Yet she still seemed surprisingly happy with even his unfinished joke. Her ears trembled a few times and she began laughing as her shoulders shook, without turning her head.

“Any living being, no matter what it is, harbors thoughts of keeping everything for itself. It has been a long time since I have felt so jealous over another's possession. It actually gives me a sense of release.”

Lawrence paused to intentionally emphasize that his next words were a joke.

“After saying all those willful things like some kid, of course you'd feel a sense of release.”

She wasn't the kind who'd kick someone away when they begged at her feet. Even if it put her at a disadvantage, even if it angered her, she could not refuse such a request made of her. That was precisely the reason she wound up spending centuries in Pasloe.

“Be it man or sheep, the things its mind holds are all the same.”

“But of course. Even you and I argue as though on equal terms.”

“Mm. If two people are not fighting over the same thing, shouting at each other in the same language, or staring at each other from the same height, then they are not arguing.”

She stroked Cole's head as she sat. A cloud of white mist erupted from her mouth each time she laughed heartily or spoke without restraint. Her quiet yet comely, even almost elegant, posture could be persuasively argued to be like a goddess guarding the woods.

That was perhaps because she was revealing her slender form, which contrasted so starkly with the effortless decadence of that roundish appearance she had when bundled up in layers. He wasn't facing a fragile girl seeking protection and kindness, but Holo, a Wisewolf of countless years who dwelled within the wheat.

“I do have a little wisdom and experience, after all. And Cole has his calm intellect and creativity.”

“And what do I have?”

“You have a responsibility.”

That was his reply.

“You have the responsibility to turn our travels into a timeless tale that'll be forever on people's tongues. Wouldn't the story of a wolf coming to the aid of a sheep be perfect for such a tale?”

For authority to exist, it needed to be supported by a solid value system. Being held accountable for one's words was a very fine principle for such a system. Holo opened her mouth to reveal her fangs, and a huge white cloud flowed out from between her teeth.

Lawrence was staring at a very cheerful grin. It was the same innocent and childish kind one would show when discussing a prank. The kind one would reveal when they had someone to call upon other than gods, if they were lost in the woods after being chased by bandits.

“Have we any chance?”

Lawrence wordlessly shrugged and handed the page that had just been under his face to her. She chuckled softly as she stared at his face; he probably had some ink on it.

“I am rather confident in my shrewdness, but.. this is not the kind of thing I am particularly skilled at.”

She was probably talking about the ability to see things from many perspectives. When things came to their worst, Holo could always force her way through them. There was little need for her to thoroughly consider everything ahead of time.

“Still, a general once said that you won't keep winning if you keep using the same strategy. The best and surest way to win is to keep adapting to your opponent's changing strategies, but..”

“But what?”

“Only the gods are capable of doing that for long.”

His mischievous joke left a look on her face that said, “just you wait.” She tilted her head slightly, yet didn't seem all that angry.

“What matters is whether the monastery possesses the bones we are searching for, and the probability of that is extremely high.”

“Correct. The bones are the key that best fits the lock in Pisky's story.”

“And you should be supporting the men you are familiar with, not the monastery, yes? There are few things more terrifying than allying yourself with those whose intentions are unknown.”

Her eyes read the paper incredibly quickly as she spoke. Lawrence had recorded his dialogue with Cole on that page, with rather messy handwriting. He remembered the dispute they had when she had lied about being unable to read, and watching her now made him question whether he could even read as well as she could.

“Quite. Especially because the members of the alliance aren't fools. Having people like Pisky on their side means they really want the land to stably flourish. Huskins' and his companions may find their homeland a little narrower, but their goals don't seem too different from the alliance's.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly, like an noblewoman appraising a precious gem. Her gaze fell on

Huskins, who slept beside the stove. But as soon as she realized that Lawrence was watching her, she turned back to him and smiled in embarrassment.

He wasn't courageous enough to ask her, but it seemed that the years separating her and Huskins were like the years that separated the two of them. Holo wasn't just loyal, she could be quite sympathetic, so if such a gulf existed between her and another, she would probably show them respect even if they *were* a sheep. Even if she displayed pride as she reached out a helping hand, maybe she felt awkward doing so.

“So. Does the traveling merchant Kraft Lawrence have the confidence to accomplish this mission?”

She so very rarely called him by name that just hearing that felt like a pleasant reward. He couldn't help but wonder if that was what people called an “anomaly.” He smiled in full confidence, like a man about to down a glass of hard liquor in a drinking competition and unwilling to let his opponent off easily. He took a deep breath.

“Well, the bones are likely a crucial item to the other party. Logically speaking, they're the only evidence pointing at the truth, so they'll likely see them as having great importance. And the greater potential our information has to break their stalemate, the more critical it will seem. These are precisely the circumstances in which a traveling merchant can take action.”

“Are you certain that is how things are? Is your information truly accurate? Truly? Will you swear on it? Then I shall place my trust in you.”

Like a child, Holo kept laughing as she kept throwing questions at him. He responded to them one by one with the poise of an outstanding merchant, leaning an elbow on the wooden crate as he spoke.

“I'll give you your proof, but in exchange would you mind answering a few of my questions as well?”

“That tax decree or whatnot will press them for time.”

“I'm sure that'll be brought up at the negotiating table. Once the next messenger gets here with a copy of the decree, they won't have much time left. If we drag things out, any potential for profit will vanish. There's a saying that it's necessary to sacrifice smaller profits to grab the bigger ones..”

“Hmph.”

She scoffed as if mocking his overly-optimistic predictions, then turned away as if bored.

“It should work out.”

She stuffed the paper back into his hand as she spoke. He received it like a nobleman receiving an edict from the King, and carefully rolled it up.

“Then it's decided.”

Having said that, he once again became a merchant. As of now, he was a servant to contracts and a slave to money, but at the same time a devious underground member of royalty controlling the world of men from the shadows.

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“Alright.”

He'd groomed his facial hair, brushed the hair on his head, and pulled up the collar of his shirt. Everything always had to be perfect before executing a business plan. But then everyone also knew that plans could never account for every possibility. His first challenge was finding a way to bait the alliance into buying his theory about the bones. If he stumbled right out of the gate, it was all over.

“I'm off.”

From an observer's perspective he must have looked like a dwarf about to enter a den of giants. But when he first started out *all* merchants looked like giants to him. And yet, he'd managed to survive among the giants until now, so he'd make it work this time as well. He left the shepherds' dormitory, seen off by Holo and Cole.

Perhaps it was because he'd forced his way back during the blizzard, but Huskins was still in rough shape.. though his cheeks did regain some color when he heard Lawrence was willing to provide his assistance. He'd always supported the monastery from the shadows, hiding his true identity. As such he had to look just like any other shepherd while he was there. When Huskins said that he had only Lawrence to rely on, he wasn't lying.

It was still snowing non-stop. The buildings were almost completely covered in snow, with only some small patches of stone or wood peeking out from under their eaves. But even in these terrible conditions, merchants found it difficult to sit still. After much toil, Lawrence arrived at alliance inn and came across a merchant who was just running there from the building across the road.

“Oh? To think we'd have a customer this early in the morning, and in this weather.”

“Of course. The worse the weather, the better the chances of striking it big.”

“Haha! I couldn't agree more!”

He seemed to be a member of the Ruvik Alliance. He opened the door without any hesitation, and quickly went inside. Coming in after him, Lawrence was addressed by a merchant standing beside the entrance.

“You looking for Lago?”

It seemed Lawrence was already a familiar face around here.

“Are my heart's thoughts written *that* clearly on my face?”

He stroked his face, and the man smiled.

“He's in the writing room.”

Given that the clerk outside the reference room looked like a theological scholar, Lawrence had to agree that “writing room” was a fitting description.

“My thanks.”

“You're here to do business with him?”

It was the expected mercantile banter, so Lawrence smiled and replied.

“That’s right. I’m here to discuss a business proposition that could bring a fortune.”

Not long after that he was once again in a world of drifting snow, making his way to Pisky's workplace. As expected he saw the theological scholar lookalike from the ground floor entrance, who didn't even ask Lawrence his name as he entered the building.

His job was probably to keep watch for spies from competing businesses. As Lawrence wondered about that, the man came up to him and pointed silently toward the building's interior. Lawrence expressed his thanks and made his way toward that room down the hall.

The very moment he approached the door, Pisky opened it as if he had been waiting.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. Is something the matter?”

Pisky invited Lawrence into his personal office, closing the door with his back to it. Given that Lawrence had come here in such awful weather, Pisky already knew he wasn't here to waste time. Lawrence patted away the snow that he missed when he'd come into the building, coughed to conceal his anxiety, and put on his business smile.

“To be honest, something happened last night that caused me much concern.”

“Something that caused you much concern? Ah, please have a seat first.”

Lawrence sat in the chair Pisky had pulled out for him, before rubbing under his nose. He pretended to catch himself doing so, and balled up his fist. It probably looked a bit too affected, but Lawrence felt that the situation called for some pretentious behavior.

“It was so extraordinary that I stayed up all night thinking about it.. Just look!”

He pointed to the bags under his eyes. Any merchant coming to a negotiation in this state would rouse suspicion, but Pisky cheerfully laughed it off.

“Indeed.”

There was a blizzard raging outside and their negotiations had reached a stalemate. In such times, talk of even more extraordinary events was something better done over a pint.

“So what could you possibly be talking about? You're not saying you've found a way to break the monastery's defenses?”

Lawrence seized the instant and countered in one stroke.

“Yes, that's precisely what I'm saying.”

Smiles were frozen on both of their faces as they stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Pisky then stood up, rubbing his hands without changing his facial expression. He opened the door and checked for eavesdroppers.

“Which is?”

He hastily answered before he'd even closed the door again. Apparently, he was quite the actor as well.

“You're aware of the port town of Gerube on the other side of the channel?”

“I am. It's the trade hub between the north and south. I've never done business there, but the delta's a fine place.”

“Are you also aware of the baseless rumor that spread there a couple years back?”

Pisky spent his days traveling, so it was possible he hadn't heard the rumor. Lawrence guessed that might be the case, but Pisky stared off into space as if his thoughts had drifted, covering his mouth with his hand as if to conceal something.

“I believe it had something to do.. with the bones.. of a pagan god, correct?”

“Correct. A wolf deities' bones.”

Pisky was looking somewhere beyond Lawrence as his mind turned. When his eyes finally focused on him again they seemed alert, as if saying “I didn't think you'd bring up something that unusual.”

“What about the wolf's bones?”

He asked his question so casually that he was either thinking Lawrence stupid, or feeling too incredulous. But Lawrence went with the flow.

“Suppose the monastery bought the wolf's bones. What then?”

“..The monastery?”

“Yes. Even the bones of a pagan deity could be cleverly used to bolster the authority of another faith. They could be used to convince those gathered in prayer for God's help in the sacred hall, and viewed as an investment by the monastery. That's how they could cling to their views in the face of this stalemate.”

Pisky closed his eyes and revealed a bitter expression after Lawrence finished his explanation. It wasn't a sign that he planned on taking Lawrence seriously, but rather considering how to minimize the harshness of his rejection, so Lawrence continued.

“Wool sales have been dropping yearly, but I believe this situation's the cumulative result of a problem that's been happening for a long time. Thus it's possible the monastery already chose a way to protect its property long ago. After all, Winfield currency's been on a downward trend, so protecting their property would mean investing in other things. Ideally, things of equal value in *any* currency. That way if the kingdom's currency took a nosedive, they could still sell the bones for a foreign currency and bring that cash back to Winfield. Then they'd be the top dogs, just like we were at that inn.”

Pisky revealed an honestly troubled look at Lawrence's wild explanation.

“What do you think?”

Pisky raised a palm to ask Lawrence to pause for a moment, as if to say “I'm already so surprised I don't even know even know what else to say.”

He then coughed three times and spoke with much effort.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

“Yes.”

“Indeed, the idea you have proposed isn't that difficult to establish.”

“As I said.”

Lawrence spoke with a pleasant smile, despite knowing that beads of sweat were already forming on his forehead.

“But we *are* the Ruvik Alliance. Um.. it's difficult to say this..”

“Go on?”

If Holo was there she would probably have been stunned by his acting.

“That.. oh, nevermind, I'll just be honest with you. We've already considered that possibility a long time ago.”

“..Huh?”

“It's a very famous legend, and-”

It looked like Pisky couldn't take it any longer. He cough to conceal his emotions and sighed defeatedly.

“Truly, a lot of people.. many of our brightest minds.. have already devoted serious time and effort to consider this problem.”

Lawrence became silent, his body still leaning forward. Pisky laid out his palms and observed Lawrence with eyes askance. Lawrence turned his eyes away, then looked back at Pisky before turning them away again. A powerful gust of wind swept past them outside, rattling the shutters.

“We ultimately concluded that nothing like that existed. One of our men just happened to be in Gerube when the legend was still being widely circulated. He conducted an investigation through a partner company and determined that only one company was doing a halfhearted search for the bones. Not only that, they weren't even large enough to buy a true holy relic, nor did they have any funding. It was just a bluff to inflate their reputation. People do that sort of thing, mostly to save to face at banquets or for some kind of twisted joke.”

Maybe Pisky was angry for having said so much. Maybe he was upset that Lawrence had wasted his time. Maybe he was simply angry for having higher expectations of Lawrence. Lawrence silently repositioned himself in his chair and wrung his hands together. An awkward atmosphere descended upon the room.

“It's just a baseless rumor.”

With a disdainful tone, Pisky had finally said those words. Lawrence jumped at the chance.

“And what if it's not?”

Lawrence's acting skills would have been god-awful if he wasn't smiling as he said that. He dropped his chin and stared upward with a satisfied smile on his face.

“..Don't joke around.”

Pisky remained silent for several seconds. He was exerting quite an effort to look composed, but Lawrence hadn't missed his reaction – he had wrung his hands, trying to act casual.

“You can decide for yourself if I'm joking or not.”

“That's not what I meant, Mr. Lawrence, please don't act like that. If I was rude, I apologize. But this is something we've really put our minds together and thought about for a long time, so holding back my emotions isn't easy. That's why-”

“You wish I wouldn't make you lose your cool by saying such reckless things, huh?”

The shutters continued clattering, with the sound of snowflakes striking them each time a gust of wind blew by. Just as Lawrence was struck by how similar the sound was to waves hitting the bow of a ship, Pisky revealed an expression as if he was seasick. Pale and wide-eyed, he bit his lower lip.

“1500 coins.”

“What?”

“Do you know how many crates are required to ship 1500 Lumione gold coins?”

The image was still fresh in Lawrence's mind of D'Jean Company proudly piling of a mountain of crates at the church in Gerube. A stiff smile formed on Pisky's face.

“M.. Mr. Lawrence..”

Beads of sweat were rolling from his temples down his face. Facial expression, vocal intonation, tears.. these could all be acted. But sweat was another matter entirely.

“What say you, Mr. Pisky?”

Lawrence leaned forward in his chair, bringing his face up close enough to Pisky's to tell what he had eaten for last night's dinner. This was the moment of truth. If Lawrence couldn't snare Pisky now, he wouldn't be able to catch his ultimate prey.

“Through you I'd like to stay in constant contact with the alliance.”

It was impossible for Pisky to misunderstand what he meant. He stared at Lawrence with fear, like a pilgrim with a knife at his throat.

“We'll break this critical stalemate, and you'll be the one to make it happen. Not a bad proposal, wouldn't you say?”

“B-But..”

When Pisky finally managed to squeeze out his next words, they came with the smell of high-quality wine.

“But.. do you have any proof?”

“Trust is always something invisible to the eye, no matter what age we live in.”

Lawrence smiled and pull back his face. Despite the sorry look on Pisky's face, which looked like it was about to turn red, Lawrence continued.

“Naturally, the monastery isn't so stupid as to clearly write 'wolf bones' in their records. They'd use another name. But as the old saying goes, 'all that is hidden shall be revealed.' If you read the records without expecting to find anything, you won't find anything. But if you read them while expecting to find a disguised item, you'll probably get different results. What do you say?”

Pisky didn't respond. In fact he seemed incapable of responding.

“Truth be told, I *do* have something to lend credibility to the legend of the wolf bones.. but to be blunt, the scope of this is much too big for a traveling merchant like me. If I said this to the officials of the alliance, I doubt they'll believe me. So I need someone to put in a few good words for me.”

Lawrence had learned this from pushing the sales of goods hauled over long distances in villages and towns on his own. Even if the pitch was the same, just having a friend corroborate it would significantly impact the resulting sales.

Lawrence might be a nice guy, but wasn't so naïve as to think that just saying the truth would win over his audience. One person would have difficulty selling even a top-quality item, but two could even make poor-quality items sell well. It was real, it was the secret to doing business.

“But..”

“Just think about it. I managed to win Mr. Deutschmann's trust at that port town. Me, a poor traveling merchant.”

Pisky looked surprised, then closed his eyes as if he was in pain. Lawrence heard that saying originated in a city in the southern empire, which grew a powerful and authoritative business network over several decades. That network now extended practically everywhere. Lawrence had never been to that city, but the profoundness of their saying wasn't lost in him. Trust wasn't something one could see. Despite that, it also wasn't something that could be overlooked.

“Mr. Pisky..”

Pisky shivered when he heard Lawrence call out to him, and a few beads of sweat fell from his chin. If the legend of the wolf bones wasn't a baseless rumor, then helping Lawrence would be his ticket to a promotion. But if it was just the ravings of a traveling madman, that trust would cast him into an abyss of destruction.

It was either heaven or hell for Pisky. If the consequences of their alliance summed to zero, then such a gamble might at least pay off for the thrill factor. But faced with a decision where failure could be his ruin, if time wasn't a factor, anyone would hesitate. And hesitation meant fear.

“..This is.. I still can't..”

Despite wanting to believe Lawrence, Pisky's face distorted in pain and he could only force out those words. His prey was trying to escape! Lawrence had no choice but to cut him off from his escape route.

“The King..”

He spoke with a voice as sharp as a needle, pausing just long enough to take a breath. If Lawrence said what he was about to say, there would be no turning back. But he swallowed, and continued.

“What if I told you that the King's already made his move?”

“Wha.. Huh? What kind of move?”

“A tax decree.”

Lawrence said the words after all. Pisky's expression collapsed and his eyes fixed on Lawrence. But unlike his expressionless face, his mind was probably turning at an incredible speed. He rose to his feet, his chair falling to the floor with a *thud*. But Lawrence wouldn't let him escape.

“What good will it do to spread the news now?”

Pisky desperately tried to shake off the hand Lawrence was holding him with. Pisky's intent was

all too obvious. Any man who felt he belonged to an organization, no matter what it was, would act like a loyal hound. It was only natural that he wanted to immediately reveal this horrible news to the alliance.

“What good will it do..? Of *course* I have to inform the alliance immediately..!”

“And after you inform them, what then? Discuss some kind of plan?”

“It's got nothing to do with you!”

“You guys are already out of options, and yet you're *still* being so stubborn?”

“!”

Pisky stopped struggling. The pained look in his eyes made it clear that he was still able to think rationally.

“Please calm down. Even if you tell the alliance right away, you'll still only be able to do nothing but fret over it. When the tax decree arrives, the monastery will go broke. And when that happens, they'll either have to kneel and beg the King's mercy, or perish courageously. But if someone pointed out that they had the wolf's bones at this critical juncture, what do you think the monastery would do?”

The monastery had no way to escape the land they were on, and that land had no way to hide them from worldly authority. If they had to pay the tax and openly asked the Ruvik Alliance for help - who just happened to want to intervene in the nation's politics - what would follow? The king would likely charge the monastery with treason and send his army there.

But even if it got to that point, the monastery was still affiliated with the Church, and so they still had a glimmer of hope. But if someone were to reveal the truth that they had the wolf's bones at that point, it would shatter that last hope. If they had to say who the scarier foe was, the King or the Pope, the Church would surely reply “the Pope.” And the alliance only had this one gamble to stake their bets on.

“Mr. Pisky, we've precious little time left, and only one chance. Before this place falls into chaos we *must* propose this foolish, but attractive idea to those who have both power and time on their side. Even if they don't immediately agree, we'll at least gain their attention, so that when chaos *does* descend they'll be more likely to reach out to us. After all, one whose drowning always reaches out for the nearest hand. I can be optimistic about this, because-”

Lawrence moved around the table and stood next to Pisky.

“I can say with certainty that the wolf's bones truly exist.”

Pisky looked at Lawrence with a blank face. He didn't seem to be staring at him, but seemed more like he was drawn by something. His breathing became short and raspy, and his shoulders rose and fell in large motions.

“Mr. Pisky..”

Pisky closed his eyes. It was the same look one might use to surrender, but as his eyes closed his mouth opened to speak.

“And you have proof of this tax decree?”

His prey had taken the bait, but wasn't completely hook. Lawrence replied slowly, suppressing his inner desire to leap into the air.

“I'm living with the shepherds, so of course I'll be the first to discover when something's been dropped outside.”

Pisky's lips shut tightly and he drew in a powerful breath as if he was clearing his mind. It was proof that Lawrence's words had reached through to him.

“When did it happen?”

“Late last night. It's one of the reasons I couldn't sleep.”

Pisky's teeth were gnashed so forcefully that Lawrence was sure he'd hear them grinding soon. If a tax really was being decreed and the news became public, then this place truly would descend into chaos like a beehive under attack. When that happened, all proposals would be rejected. After all, the alliance couldn't be moved by just one person.

Pisky was wise enough to understand all of this. Anticipating this, Lawrence stopped talking. As long as it was for his own profit, a proper merchant would be willing to sit all night for the scales to tip in their favor. Only time flowed in this serene atmosphere unique to snowy days. Beads of sweat formed on Pisky's forehead, and then his eyes slowly opened.

“1500.”

“Hmm?”

“How many crates *are* required to ship 1500 Lumione gold coins?”

Lawrence couldn't help but relax his facial muscles, but it wasn't because of Pisky's silly question. He just knew that it was the indication that they'd established a contract.

“I promise you won't regret this.”

Pisky burst into laughter when he heard that. He clamped his hands together, leaned back in his chair, and then wiped the sweat roughly from his face.

“Even if it’s only once, I would die to see what 1500 Lumione gold coins look like.”

Lawrence could only stretch out his hand.

“If all goes well, you’ll find out for sure.”

“Let's hope so!”

With that, Lawrence successfully passed the first difficult hurdle.

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## Chapter 5

After they shook hands to establish their contract, Pisky jumped into action in a flash. He was, after all, the man whose job it was to bring small bands of disparate people together to establish new towns and villages. It was quite likely that he had a better understanding than Lawrence did of how to motivate a group, being a member of one.

Pisky didn't immediately head off to inform the alliance big shots that the wolf's bones might be authentic, excited and without a plan. He believed their best course of action was to first gather allies.

“It should be someone curious but who can keep a secret, has good foresight, and has time to spare. The kind of person anyone would want on their side, not just someone forming a band of top-tier merchants. And maybe God's on our side, because there's a lot of outstanding people like that gathered here.”

In truth, if they didn't first conduct a thorough investigation about the wolf's bones before they informed the powerful members of the alliance, it would only lead to questions about their sanity and solve nothing. And such an investigation required like-minded allies.

“Then can I count on you to make those arrangements?”

“Won't be a problem. I'll take a day or two to look through the financial records. As long as we find traces of evidence that indicate the monastery's hiding something, fabricating the rest won't be a challenge for us.”

Pisky smiled proudly, the kind of smile making him seem entirely dependable.

“I stand assured.”

“I hope to finish preparing before the storm ends, if possible. We can only ask them to listen to our input when they have free time. What remains is.. having solid evidence to persuade them.”

If Lawrence's wasn't here, Pisky wouldn't be able to push the idea that the wolf's bones really existed. After all, if there *were* any anomalies in the financial records that pointed to the wolf's bones being there, Pisky would have surely found them by now.

“I won't disappoint you on that end. Please rest assured and leave that part to me.”

Pisky nodded his head and spoke.

“Oh yes..”

“Hmm?”

“Aren't you planning on discussing how we'll split the profits?”

A merchant's goal was always to profit. If he made no mention of how profits were to be divided, it implied he had ulterior motives. Pisky watched Lawrence with a piercing stare. Lawrence looked in another direction as he replied.

“I just don't worry that our profits will be so meager as to warrant that kind of discussion.”

“..”

Pisky looked at him in agreement as if to say, “Sorry to have doubted you” and nodded.

“Sometimes I get to wondering whether it wouldn't suit me better to be in the simpler business of buying and selling goods.”

A merchant who always suspected his opponents as if they were walking on thin ice would only be that way because the business he was normally involved in was complicated. Lawrence replied to Pisky's self-deprecating comment.

“I also sometimes wish I could do business purely for my own sake.”

“Would that be a good thing, or a bad thing?”

Lawrence pulled up the collar of his coat as Pisky opened the door, then reflexively looked around to check if Holo was listening in.

“At least I wouldn't be so tired all the time.”

Pisky smiled and wondered about that for a moment, then sighed to indicate that he'd experienced the same thing.

“Too true. Tiredness is the true source of disaster.”

Were they at a banquet, that would have been the moment they would have patted each other on the shoulder. Merchants were a bit more composed than that, however, so the two of them only exchanged a quick glance.

“We will arm ourselves with parchment and ink. What about you, Mr. Lawrence?”

“A testimony.. and parchment as well.”

Telling them he possessed physical evidence was dangerous, given that he was on his own at the moment in this isolated place. It was very likely they would attempt to steal physical evidence by force. But looking at things from Pisky's perspective, Lawrence felt a simple testimony wasn't enough. That's why he said what he did, the way he did. Given how Pisky visibly relaxed when he heard that, it was the right call.

"In any case, I'm betting it all on you, Mr. Lawrence."

"I realize the graveness of the situation."

"Then I'll go and find our allies right away. What about you?"

"I've got to head back to our quarters and discuss things with my companions. This is a tricky situation, after all, and compared to what one with ink-stained hands might say, the words of one whose hands lie concealed under robes may prove to be more convincing."

Pisky nodded his head and pushed the door open.

"May this blizzard continue raging a while longer. As it stands right now, our time may be quite limited."

If they couldn't negotiate before the alliance or monastery caught wind of the tax decree, Lawrence's plan would be difficult to enact. Having exited the building, Lawrence found that the snow had let up somewhat. From the sky's appearance, the storm wasn't ending anytime soon. But a messenger might just be willing to risk this weather to carry a King's letter in his bosom.

"Please come directly to the reference room next time. Would it be convenient for me.. to visit you at your quarters?"

"But of course. I'm counting on you, then."

That was it. They shook hands and went their separate ways.

Once again, Lawrence trudged into the snow drifts and followed the path of his own faded footprints back to the shepherds' dormitory. Whenever he did something for someone else, that achievement would fade in time as quickly as his footprints in the snow. Even Holo's massive footprints would likewise quickly fade with the passage of time.

Even those hometowns that friends liked to quip would never vanish weren't eternal places. Yet, even after all the footprints vanished all one needed to do was keep walking. That was also true for hometowns.

Lawrence was willing to help Huskins because he could use this as an example for Holo, that building a new home wasn't just talk. Someone *would* lend a helping hand when one was in

danger. This wasn't a world devoid of sympathy, nor one filled with despair.

When he re-entered the dormitory, he found Holo and Huskins softly talking with the stove between them. Actually, it was more accurate to say that Huskins was relating his life's experiences to her bit by bit while she silently listened.

"Our first prey has more or less successfully taken the bait."

".."

Huskins gave a hard, solemn nod as if to express his gratitude.

"I'm gonna get some sleep. Pisky's gathering allies to pore over the financial records, and they should be able to find something suspicious soon enough."

The real challenge lay with what they had to do after convincing the alliance that the wolf's bones truly existed. Once the alliance was convinced, they'd surely push their demands even harder. Just how hard would depend on how credible the legend was.

Lawrence couldn't guarantee how solid his grip on the reins was. After all, this time he wasn't steering some horse or cow. He needed to get some sleep and recover his stamina, or he'd be drained of what little remained in no time.

Perhaps because she was self-conscious with Huskins there, Holo didn't so much as look at him. She only gently touched his hand as they brushed by one another.

He found Cole soundly asleep in their room when he entered. Despite someone at least being there so he wouldn't have to shiver alone under the covers, he couldn't help but feel that something was missing.

He slipped under the covers with a wry smile.

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With the window shutters closed and caked in snow, it was impossible to tell what time it was. Lawrence woke up guessing it was the afternoon. He hadn't slept much, but got up because something felt strange.. It was too quiet.

He sat up and immediately left the bed to open the window, hearing the snow fall off of it. He then left the window completely open while icy air poured into the room. It bit at his cheeks as the snowy white landscape came into his view.

The winds had calmed considerably, and despite still snowing outside it was no longer a blizzard. The world had settled back into that unique silence characteristic of snowy days. It was so quiet one could hear the ringing in one's ears.

He'd probably been roused by the silence. He frequently woke up because it was too quiet, rather than too loud, because when dead silence surrounded a person it felt like something bad was about to happen.

"..You're alone, huh."

He entered the room with the stove to find Holo tending to the fire on her own.

"I was just deliberating whether or not I should rouse you."

"Were you unable to bear the thought of waking me after seeing how tired I was?"

With Huskins gone he didn't hesitate to sit next to her. She replied curtly as she raked at the coals in stove with an iron poker.

"Seeing that foolish expression on your face made me feel too lazy to even try."

"Did something happen?"

Seeing the worn-out Huskins gone, let alone Cole, meant that something must have happened. Especially since the snowstorm that had brought time to a standstill was had ceased. Holo relaxed her grip on the poker and leaned up against Lawrence.

"When the snowfall thinned, representatives from the monastery paid this place a visit. They asked whether the shepherds had seen the messenger expected to arrive here yesterday or today."

"What did Mr. Huskins say?"

"The old man told us they were likely talking about the dead man he had found. He said he will feign ignorance for the time being, as he found the body at a place very far away and probably beyond the reach of normal shepherds. Young Cole went with him."

As it stood, messengers with copies of the decree would probably arrive as early as tomorrow, or perhaps the day after.

"What should we do?"

"Right now all we can do is wait. Once Pisky and the others find something usable as evidence, we'll seek a hearing with the higher-ups of the alliance."

"Oh.."

Hearing her unenthusiastic response made him direct his eyes away from her head and toward

her tail. She suddenly grabbed his ear in response.

“Can you ever make a judgment without checking the response of my tail?”

“A.. accomplishing something big takes a vigilant eye..”

“Foolish mule.”

She turned her face away and released his ear, but only after tugging it violently. She didn't hold back, so his ear throbbed in pain. For her to be this forceful meant that she was truly angry, but it was impossible for him to know whether it the whim of a maiden's heart, or an animal's. Perhaps to her it felt like being asked a question, only to not have her answer taken seriously in lieu of whatever emotions her ears and tail betrayed were in her heart.

“Of course you'll get your chance to go up on the stage.”

Her ears shot up on her slightly-lowered head when she heard that. He couldn't help but want to pat her head when he saw such an obvious reaction, but then she spoke.

“Do you want to have your ears bitten off?”

Her ears were very important, but he considered his own just as vital. He quickly shook his head.

“The alliance is an extremely large organization. Of course only a small fraction of their representatives are here. The real big-shots are probably someplace warm and untouched by this snow. But they're still an organization, so moving them into action will require persuasive power. And sometimes, such persuasion requires more than the facts and proof.”

She lowered her head and lifted her gaze, her eyes revealing a guarded look. Since she was being intentionally disagreeable, he guessed she did that because he liked girls who acted that way.

“The moment I stand before a group, I grow extremely nervous. You, on the other hand, are a born actress.”

He intentionally aimed his words at her behavior. Despite releasing a wicked “Hmph” as if he'd spoiled all of her fun, her tail flicked excitedly and gave away her good mood.

“We'll leave the knowledge up to Cole, and the legwork to me.”

“And I?”

He struggled to find the perfect word in reply, but finally uttered one.

“Atmosphere.”

Holo couldn't hold in her laughter; after quite some time it finally ended in a sigh. She then hugged his arm and whispered into his ear.

“Indeed, I am always responsible for building an atmosphere for you to destroy.”

“..”

He very much wanted to refute her, but opted to cough and continue instead.

“It's crucial for us to have a solid grasp of the subtle changes in this atmosphere. There may be evidence, but it's still undeniable that we have no solid proof. Our most important task is to convince those guys that this gamble is worth taking. So, being frank..”

He faced Holo before continuing.

“You will have a heavy influence on whether this plan succeeds or fails.”

Her round, amber, vaguely red pupils were revealed. Despite having witnessed so much of the good and bad of the world, her eyes somehow retained the clarity of an innocent maiden's. Slowly, those crystal-clear eyes blinked once, and when they reopened an entirely different person was looking at him. When she spoke, it was with an intimidating voice.

“Just leave it to me. That old man made a promise.”

“And what did he promise?”

“That when we are successful, he will reward me with the year's fattest sheep.”

Such shrewdness was to be expected of a mutton-eating sheep-spirit disguised as a human, who worked hard inwardly and outwardly to establish a second home here. It was rather fitting that he would make such an offer.

Having been on the receiving end of such a clever and worldly offer, Holo must have been unable to respond with anything but a smile. She must have thought something like “we *must* find a way to help this person.”

“He spoke much of the process of building a home, and shared his experiences in keeping his new home intact.”

The look on her face was a serious mixture of calm with a tinge of anger. Lawrence didn't even have to look at her tail to know she was anxious. He knew how important loyalty was to her, and that she was surprisingly persistent when it came to certain matters.

“Did he share any advice worth noting down?”

Her tail swished once with vigor.

“..Yes.”

“Is that so.”

If she opened her mouth right now and requested that he build her a hometown like Huskins, Lawrence wouldn't be able to easily reply in the positive. Both of them could sense this without saying anything.

But if they evaded the topic it wouldn't seem like they trusted each other, and it would only make things more awkward. So seeing her visibly relax, he put his arm around her and was about to pull her closer when-

“Alright.”

She spoke as she lifted his arm.

“It is time.”

“..”

“Heh. Do not look at me that way. Or would you rather have others see you panicked and flustered once more?”

From somewhere beyond her mischievous smile he heard the sounds of a walking stick and human footsteps. He guessed that Cole and Huskins had returned.

Holo stood up and gave a mighty stretch; her joints cracked and her tail fur stood on-end. He smiled as he watched her, but the moment didn't last. She didn't pinch his cheeks. Instead, she covered her ears and tail.

There was no longer any reason for her to conceal her true appearance from Huskins. Those footsteps he had just heard well after she did must have belonged to someone more than just Cole and Huskins. Could it be..

His hair stood on-end. His hand instinctively pressed against his chest, despite him knowing it would do him no good. For there lay the King's hidden decree, stolen from a fallen messenger by Huskins.

Even if Lawrence cast the parchment into the flames now it wouldn't burn immediately like wood-based paper. Holo look at him stunned, as if to ask “what is wrong?” The door swung open. All he could do now was pray to God.

“Excuse me.”

A sturdy voice rang out, the kind that gave no room for argument. It was a man wearing a robe different from Holo’s, whose tone of voice implied he was accustomed to pressuring others. Two monks stood outside their door with Huskins sandwiched between them. One of them was the strong-voiced man.

“Pardon our intrusion. Hey!”

“Yes!”

The younger of the monks stepped into the room and immediately took a look around, then began sifting through Huskins’ personal belongings. Huskins watched his every move, hiding his emotions beneath his stoic monk-like expression capable of even fooling Holo.

The one to worry about was Cole, who was too young for facial hair, let alone ever experiencing anything like this. As their eyes met Lawrence could see that he was fearful enough to begin shivering at any moment.

“You are a traveling merchant, correct?”

The rotund elder monk spoke to Lawrence from the door. For him to not enter implied that he considered a shepherd’s residence unclean.

“Yes. We are staying here temporarily, having been unable to find accommodation at an inn.”

“I see. You’re also one of Ruvik’s?”

“No. I am a member of the Rowen Trading Guild..”

“Hmm.”

The monk nodded his head and huffed. His air was so repugnant that Lawrence wondered if that huff wasn’t a reply, but the fat folds on his neck forcing out air as he nodded.

“May I ask what has happened?”

The mood was too tense for the monks to have come here for a casual chat, given that the monk behind Lawrence was roughly rummaging baggage, blankets and even the firewood. It seemed the possibilities were limited.

Huskins had obviously fallen under the monk’s suspicion. They were suspecting that he’d encountered a messenger while searching for a stray sheep, and that he had greedily stolen something from them. In fact, such things weren’t rare.

“No, nothing out of the ordinary has happened.. you said a moment ago that you are a member of the Rowen Trading Guild?”

The monk asked, and Lawrence could only reply honestly.

“That’s right.”

“I don’t believe out monastery has had any business dealings with your guild.”

If he started panicking now, he’d have no grounds to complain later when Holo planted her foot in his rear.

“Yes, though I’m not actually here to do business.”

“Oh?”

The cenobite said, narrowing his eyes.

“My purpose in coming here with her and that child of God is to be purified by the holiness of the Brondel Monastery.”

“..You’re here on pilgrimage?”

“That’s right.”

It had been a long time since the Brondel Monastery received a pilgrim with hospitality. It was unusual that a merchant would bring a young nun and a boy here on pilgrimage now. His mouth spread into a smile, but his eyes weren’t smiling.

“Speaking of Rowen, I remember they are a guild on the mainland.. Aren’t there a number of famous churches and monasteries there already, like the Saint Liebert Monastery, Lachak Monastery, or the Churches of Giboro or Ruvineigen?”

His question was nothing short of an interrogation, given the sounds of the other monk ransacking the place behind Lawrence.

“I’d heard a rumor there was a certain holy relic here.”

“Holy relic.”

The monk repeated bluntly, without even bothering to use a questioning tone.

“Indeed. I have heard that your monastery has the deepest affections of not only God, but also the sheep. Compared to the other names you mentioned, your monastery seems more suited to a merchant like myself.”

The monk chuckled to match Lawrence's humor, but moved his fat gaze from Lawrence for a moment as the other monk moved into the adjacent room. Lawrence's baggage, and his companions, were placed there, but merchants had a habit of carrying anything dangerous on their person. They had nothing to fear even if their belongings were spilled out on the ground.

"I see.. judging from your appearance, you must be quite an experienced merchant. May God bless you!"

Lawrence nodded frankly, despite knowing the monk was being sarcastic.

"Marco!"

The younger monk heard the fat one's call and stopped rudely flipping through the items in the bedroom, rushing out like a trained dog. His manner was a far cry from the kind of monk who normally came to mind, quietly praying day after day. In fact he more resembled a trained mercenary.

"What's the situation?"

"I found nothing."

"Is that so?"

Was the fat monk being so openly hostile just to put pressure on Lawrence, Holo, Cole and Huskins? Or was he just trying to save face, having found nothing? Whatever the case, it seemed the four of them were safe for the time being, or so Lawrence thought.

"The cuckoo lays her eggs in the nests of other birds. Search these two."

The fat monk must have once been a merchant, but once Lawrence realized that it was too late. The younger monk named Marco shot a glance at Lawrence, then looked at Holo. A lecherous look flashed across his face as he shoved Lawrence aside and approached her.

"In God's name, please bear with me."

His apparent decorum only served to make Marco seem more snake-like. Holo's tail was concealed under her robe, and her ears under her hood. She wore the expression of a saintly woman calmly awaiting martyrdom, but Lawrence felt like an ant in a frying pan.

If that wasn't enough, Marco didn't bother checking the sleeves of her robe first, and instead traced his hands down her shoulders along the curves of her body. She shrank back momentarily when his hands touched her breasts.

"What's this?"

He had discovered the small pouch of wheat she wore around her neck. The fact that he had found something tucked away under her garments revealed just how lecherous his search was.

“Wheat?”

“A protective charm..”

He grin repulsively at her soft, mosquito-like reply, as if his sadism was appeased. Lawrence felt his hands ball into fists as he swallowed his anger. Holo’s willingness to bear this shame would be for naught if he wasn’t willing to do the same.

By this time Marco’s hands were sliding down her waist, and he was forced to kneel due to the height difference between them. If he reached behind her, he would surely find her tail. Would she still be able to hide from his hands?

Lawrence’s anxiety was the only reason he managed to barely contain the rage in his heart. As Marco’s hands being sliding from her sides to her rear-

“Boo.. hoo..”

He had been shamelessly touching her waist under her lowly hung head, but when he heard her sniffing and sobbing, he lifted his head and clicked his tongue. Tears were streaming from her eyes as she clutched her wheat pouch, as if praying for divine protection. Marco moved his hands away, knowing that the jig was up. He hastily turned back around to check her sleeves before speaking.

“God has already proven your innocence.”

She softly nodded. Lawrence could tell that her tears were feigned, but her ability to cry like that impressed him greatly. But his relief was short-lived, since he was obviously next.

“Sorry.”

The look in Marco’s eyes had markedly changed. Now that it was Lawrence’s turn to be searched, there was no reason for him to hold back. Lawrence was the more suspicious one of the two, after all.

Lawrence actually had a number of letters on his person, but it was all over if they discovered the one with the tax decree. He was desperately trying to think of a way to pull the letter out and hide it. So in the instant that Marco reached his arms out toward Lawrence, as his eyes met Holo’s-

“Watch out!”

Lawrence cried as he shoved Marco aside, rushing toward her. As their eyes met, she had

nodded slightly, then at the last possible moment she tearfully wobbled with her hands still clutching the wheat pouch in a prayerful pose. She tumbled toward the stove as though a spell of amnesia had caused her to faint.

Lawrence caught her in his arms and they fell to the floor. They had won themselves a brief respite, but what now? What was their best course of action? Lawrence was lost in contemplation as he held Holo, hearing footsteps approach him from behind. He knew their ruse wasn't going to last much longer.

“Is she hurt?”

Marco shamelessly uttered those pretentious words in an attempt to appear considerate, but Lawrence wasn't so far gone that he snapped at him.

“She's fine.”

He lifted her up as he spoke, while she kept her eyes closed and pretended to be out. Cole had been the one to come up behind them a moment ago, and he helped Lawrence lift Holo back up.

“Help her into the next room.”

The two of them carried Holo to the adjacent room and lay her down on the bed. Marco kept his eyes on them the entire time, leaving Lawrence with no chance to pull the letter out and hide it. Lawrence's heart raced as he struggled to find a solution, feeling as though his stomach was on fire.

“Can we continue our search now?”

Lawrence could only accede to Marco's uncompromising request like an obedient lamb.

“Then, please take off your coat.”

Lawrence slowly removed his coat and handed it to Marco, who shook it a few times and then checked the pockets and between the layers of fabric for any concealed items. It was apparent from his method that he wasn't new to this.



“Your shirt!”

*Oh God!* Lawrence’s heart cried out as he removed his shirt with the letters in it, fighting to stay composed. And then-

“..nothing here.”

Marco handed Lawrence back his shirt after another methodical search.

“God has shown us the truth.”

With only those words, Marco turned to report the results to the elder monk. The only reason Lawrence didn’t collapse limply to the floor was that he caught sight of Holo’s lips; they were turned up in a proud smile as she lay face-up on the bed.

“Our apologies for the trouble we’ve put you through. God will surely respond to the faith you have shown in coming here on pilgrimage.”

The two monks left, sparing nothing more than those obviously-insincere words. Huskins eyed them from the hallway as they left, then joined Lawrence and the others in their room. As Cole closed the door behind him, the three of them simultaneously let out a long breath.

“I didn’t even notice that you took them..”

Lawrence spoke to Holo, watching her smile mischievously as she leaned against the door jamb.

“You thought I was only crying the whole time? Really..”

She pulled the various letters out from under her robe as she approached him and fanned him with them.

“I thought you noticed right away.”

It had been her plan from the very start, and the reason she clutched the pouch of wheat as though praying. The fact that he hadn’t realized made him wonder how bad things would have turn out if their eyes hadn’t met in that critical moment. The thought made a wave of fear wash over his heart, and brought an anxious smile to his face.

“Regardless, we overcame that hurdle so I suppose it matters not. Especially since I was able to see you acting so foolishly.”

She nudged his chest as she spoke, at which point Huskins unexpectedly burst out into soft laughter. After a while he seemed to cough himself back out of the laughter and sat down in front of the stove.

“Pardon my rudeness.”

His brief apology only made things more awkward. Though Holo feigned indifference, Lawrence’s face instinctively turned a deep red.

“But under these circumstances, the monastery will probably send people out to find the messengers..”

Lawrence finally regained his composure when Huskins cut to the chase.

“Will they be able to make it back by tomorrow?”

“It is quite far, and the sun will soon set, so they will probably return tomorrow evening, or the day after.. how is our situation? Have we any chance for success?”

“I can’t guarantee everything will go smoothly, but I’ve enlisted the help of someone very reliable.”

“I see.. no..”

“?”

Lawrence was about to ask what Huskins meant, but stopped when Huskins shook his head and lowered it slightly.

“I’m sorry to have doubted you. Humans are extremely intelligent. I don’t know if I have too much pride or am simply jealous, but I’ve wanted to admit that.”

He said this rather cheerfully, just before Lawrence heard the sound of quick, powerful footsteps heading their way. In the past he’d had many chances to hold his breath and discriminate between footsteps to detect bandits and wolves, so he recognized that these were friendly. When knocks were heard at the door, Cole opened it to reveal Pisky.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

He was apple-cheeked. Lawrence exchanged glances with Holo and Cole, then watched Huskins as he stood. But when Huskins pointed at the shepherd’s staff beside him and shook his head, Lawrence realized he meant to say, “I have asked for your help, so I trust you enough to handle it from here.” Lawrence nodded and addressed Pisky.

“Would it too much trouble if my companions join us?”

“No, it wouldn’t. In fact I’d *prefer* if they joined us. Those monks already came here, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, and I can’t say they were pleasant.”

Pisky wore a smile of childlike innocence.

“That bad, huh? Still, the fact you can say that means it turned out alright, didn’t it? Hearing that they were here already kind of eases my mind, though it probably shouldn’t.”

Once they’d all left the room, he continued.

“If we’re going to do this, we’ll have to do it now.”

The sun was getting ready to set, and the snow had almost stopped entirely.

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The reference room was packed with merchants when they arrived, all of whom seemed to possess unusual habits. It didn’t look like their businesses were on hiatus, yet these youths let their facial hair grow untamed and kept their hair long like knights.

As they followed Pisky into the room, someone whistled softly in welcome.

“Those two monks who visited you are despised by those at our inn.”

Pisky rested a hand on the desk in the innermost corner of the room, then turned to Lawrence and focused the conversation.

“‘Did the messengers arrive?’ ‘Are you hiding any letters?’ They kept asking so stubbornly, and rifling through our things.. I suppose it just goes to show how anxious they really are. Maybe they were also worried that the King was serious about a new tax, and that he’d issue a decree soon.”

“I see. Then they’re aware that danger’s lurking right around the corner.”

Pisky briefly closed his eyes in agreement. It was the type of seemingly-spiritual gesture used in darkly lit places where sound was forbidden.

“Then, what has your investigation concluded?”

“Since we knew what to look for this time, it didn’t take us long to find something. After all, when someone buys something expensive they can only hide it in with other expensive things. But we’re presupposing that we found what we’re looking for, and obviously can’t know for sure.”

Confirming that it was would require Lawrence’s help.

“They also tossed it into their lists of regular expenditures to make it less conspicuous than their other one-time purchases, which would have been too obvious. Their regular expenditures are for robes and monk’s accessories, building materials, stonemason’s fees, and money for banquet spices for special guests.”

As he spoke he handed Lawrence the section of their financial records he was talking about. Lawrence glanced at it and had to admit that it wouldn’t have appeared odd without closer inspection - it was just another account book.

“We merchants have the advantage of numbers, of many pairs of eyes and ears and the collective information of many distant regions. This particular spice, this saffron delivered through two towns, was the key.”

“How so?”

“Because it just so happens that at the time they bought this shipment of saffron, it was the only item that wasn’t actually available at the town. It happened to be on a ship delayed by a storm. So the imperial merchants specializing in goods import must have known what the monastery was up to and used this to their advantage. After all, they’d hardly spend money to ship empty crates - they’d probably ship big-ticket items. Of course, this ended up pointing us in the right direction.”

Once one lie was discovered, the whole house of lies would come crashing down. Once it was discovered that a secret item might be shipped, those would-be empty crates were easier to spot and the mystery could be unraveled.

“They paid more than the market value for that shipment. Who knows, maybe the crates really were empty, and there are goods that are even beyond our combined knowledge. However..”

“However, finding this is already enough.”

Lawrence continued as he handed the page back to Pisky.

“Then the earliest they might come back is sometime tonight?”

“Yes, after all the main monastery has sent out their monks so the situation is probably desperate. In fact they probably even sent shepherds out to find the messengers.”

That corroborated with what Huskins told them. Pisky’s expression became serious.

“If it’s alright with you, the higher-ups are already gathered for a meeting.”

Lawrence looked at Holo and Cole on either side of him. They slowly nodded their heads.

“No problem.”

“Then..”

Pisky shifted his body off the desk he was leaning against.

“Let’s go.”

~~~~

When they arrived, Lawrence noticed that the atmosphere in the alliance’s inn was unusual. The place was wrapped in a strange heat, like a fire with too much fuel. It might be an aftereffect of the monks’ visit. When two arrogant monks acted so brashly, a merchant who wasn’t half-asleep would instantly smell blood, like a wolf.

The merchants here had to know that the monks were acting so imprudently because they were at the end of their ropes. All of those gathered here were the kind who would pounce at the monastery’s weakness, or rubberneckers here to watch the inevitable assault. It was only natural for a place filled with such people to feel intensely hot.

That’s why all eyes were on Lawrence and his companions as Pisky led them inside. In came an outsider merchant, a nun-like girl, and a servant-like boy, all being led deep into their den - even up the stairs! - by none other than Pisky himself. Of course there was a question mark above every head watching them.

Did those three uncover something? Jealous and envious gazes shot in their direction, one after the other, as if to burn holes through them. Setting Holo aside, even Lawrence felt pricked by those stares. It was no wonder that Cole didn’t dare to lift his face the entire time.

“Here we are.”

Pisky stopped in front of a door in the middle of the third floor. The young merchant then straightened his clothes before knocking on that door.

“Please pardon our intrusion.”

The moment they entered, the odors of spices mixed in honeyed milk washed over them. It was the type of scent that surrounded men that felt food wasn’t fit for human consumption if it wasn’t richly spiced.

Four middle-aged merchants were seated at a large round table in the center of this cavernous room. Given the air they gave off, it wouldn’t be surprising for them to be the owners of large companies. In fact they probably were. It was obvious that life at this snowy monastery was taking its toll on them. However, the fact that only one of the four glanced towards them likely had little to do with fatigue.

“I, your humblest servant Lago Pisky, have come to visit.”

“Spare us the pleasantries. We haven’t the time.”

The man who spoke and gestured for Pisky to stop was a stocky man whose hair curled up at his ears. His long, narrow eyes then turned to Lawrence.

“So I hear you’re affiliated with Rowen?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm..”

He simply asked the question he wanted answered, giving neither any response nor an opportunity for Lawrence to introduce himself. The other men at the table remained still, not even reaching for their drinks.

“May we explain ourselves?”

Pisky spoke as if unwilling to let the heavy atmosphere daunt him. The man with the curled hair raised his hand in response, thus ordering them to begin.

“Our thanks for sparing some of your precious time to hear us. First of all, please direct your attention to these documents.”

Pisky produced the stack of parchments that had been tucked under his arm, at which point the servant standing against the wall immediately retrieved them from him. He placed the documents in the middle of the round table. The four men then lazily reached out for them, their eyes narrowing as they scanned the them.

“Copies of their financial records, huh? What’s wrong with their accounts?”

This time, another of the men spoke. He was practically skin and bones, and seemed to be the paranoid type. He spoke as if he was already tired of their accounts. His depressing eyes were deeply wrinkled, to the point where they looked scaly. The other men seemed just as tired, and merely gave the documents a cursory glance before casting them back on the table.

“We’ve discovered a payment made for an empty shipment of crates, and a number of purchases for items at higher than market value.”

The men didn’t even look at each other before one of them spoke to Pisky on their behalf.

“Such things are hardly out of the ordinary for organizations unable to escape the shackles of tax.”

“Yes, that is indeed true.”

“Then what do you seek to prove in showing this to us now?”

Pisky inhaled sharply at the man’s piercing glance. It was Lawrence’s turn to talk.

“We suspect the monastery’s using their expenditures to cover things up, not their income.”

All four of the men focused their eyes on the outsider who was talking. Lawrence wasn’t quite sure if they did so out of interest or anger.

“Expenditures?”

“Correct.”

One of the other men interjected.

“Just now, you said you belong to Rowen.. do you speak on Sir Kodens’ behalf?”

Kodens was the man who controlled the Rowen Trading Guild at his own round table. He was an existence far beyond Lawrence’s reach. His round table might even be on par with the table these four men were sitting around.

“No I do not.”

“Then, is this someone else’s idea?”

The eyes and attitudes of the four turned quite severe; it was the type of response one might expect when another guild’s intervention was suspected. Their banner wore the moon and shield. No man would wander alone under another banner without the backing of his own guild.

“Please allow me to correct what I’ve just said: I am but a lone wandering merchant.”

“Talk is cheap.”

That was a fair response. Lawrence apologized as he lifted the small knife buckled at his waist. He unhesitatingly unsheathed it and jabbed it into his palm.

“I’m willing to sign and leave my blood print on a statement.”

The very instant that a traveling merchant abandoned his guild, he would have nowhere left to go. The four of them turned away in disgust.

“You!”

One of them gestured at the servant up against the wall with his chin, who then immediately left the room. Lawrence guessed he had been sent to fetch a bandage or cloth for his wound.

“One indeed needs to remember the importance of taking some risks while they are young. I shall overlook the name of Rowen this time, and pay my respects to your name instead by listening to your explanation.”

It would be a lie to say that Lawrence didn’t laugh upon hearing that.

“I am Kraft Lawrence.”

The servant quickly returned with a bandage, at which point Holo snatched it and began dressing Lawrence’s wound. Based on her demeanor, Lawrence knew his performance had been acceptable.

“Kraft Lawrence, what have you and Lago Pisky from our alliance deduced? You claim the monastery is covering something up with its expenditures? If we take the King’s taxes into account, then their buying empty crates or paying over market values is not unusual enough to warrant our attention.”

“That would indeed be so, if they were only doing it to cover up for tax evasion.”

“And what other reason would they have for doing so?”

Holo finished dressing his wound and patted his hand softly to cheer him on. Encouraged, he replied.

“For the sake of buying something expensive, which no one could know was in their possession.”

The four of them instantly gazed at one another.

“*Something?* What kind of something?”

They were finally showing interest. Lawrence couldn’t help but clench his right hand, now that it was wrapped in bandages.

“The bones of a wolf. Essentially, a relic serving as evidence of the passing of a so-called god of the northern regions rampant with paganism.”

Those were the key words. He breathed in, telling himself that his words would be taken as a joke if he didn’t press on and follow up on his argument immediately.

“And it’s not just some baseless rumor. Across the strait lies the port town of Gerube, and its

D’Jean Company. By now I’m sure you’re all aware of the Narwhale incident that took place there a few days ago. Fifteen hundred of D’Jean’s Lumiones were sucked into that whirlpool.”

The four of them kept silent. Lawrence drew another breath and continued.

“Up the Roef River lies the town of Lisco, which is the home of one Diva Company - the company that funded D’Jean. Their purpose was to purchase these wolf’s bones.”

Lawrence felt he was doing well so far. At worst the words he spoke might be coming out a little too quickly, but he was confident in those words. He was convinced that the upper echelons in the Ruvik Alliance would have heard of the bones as well as Diva Company, which controlled the mines in that region. Even if he didn’t immediately win their trust, they would at least know how much care and effort had been put into this deduction. He was deeply convinced of this.

“What are your thoughts?”

And yet, they didn’t respond. In fact, the room was filled with a lax atmosphere that almost felt fatigued. Pisky looked at Lawrence, his eyes begging Lawrence to offer a more persuasive argument, lest the four men doom their plan to failure. Just as Lawrence was about to open his mouth in a panic, Holo interrupted.

“If you have thoughts, please do not hesitate to share them with us.”

Everyone turned to her in astonishment, but the Wisewolf was undaunted.

“God said to not feign lack of interest.”

Anyone who joked around in such a setting was either a clown or a fool, because the lofty poise of the four men at the table - with heads high and chests out - was no mere act. However, their status was only esteemed in the world of men. There was one cunning point of fact that applied in the place they were in right now: a monastery where monks prayed to an existence higher than even Huskins and Holo - the One True God.

“Miss.. begging your pardon, as a maiden of great faith who prays daily, but could you please clarify?”



“God exists far beyond the reach of man. Even with my hood over my eyes and my head bowed low, when I rely on His power it becomes child’s play to see through such details.”

An extraordinary aura was a basis of great power. The daunting atmosphere emanating from the four who were at the table wasn’t visible to the eyes. Establishing such an atmosphere required more than simple acknowledgment from Lawrence’s party, but also their conviction that the men were indeed distinguished. For one to not be able to judge such an atmosphere implied that he or she was a born fool, or someone who lived by entirely different philosophies.

“Thank you.. for sharing your precious wisdom with us.”

When faced with some impudent brat with their head in the clouds, a powerful man only had to put them in their place. But if that brat was a girl, putting her in her place would only lead to awkwardness.

The accepted way to deal with insignificant characters like women or children was to put on a slight smile, comfort and console them, and leave them in the background like a vase. Lawrence had been bound by these social trappings himself not too long ago, so he couldn’t help but laugh freely at the sight of them all stiffly smiling.

“So, should I re-ask my question?”

Their faces reddened, making it all the more obvious just how pale they had just been. They found themselves struggling between their positions, common sense and dignity. Even a thin blanket would warm one up if one rubbed up against it.

Was it Holo’s plan to infuriate them, then strike them hard and reign them in when they were too furious to even respond? Such a strategy was quite likely to succeed, and if it did work on these four it would be quite a mean feat. But this wasn’t a children’s quarrel, so Lawrence moved in to repeat his question when-

“No.”

One of the red-faced men spoke firmly from between his tightly-shut lips.

“That will be unnecessary.”

He then raised his right hand up above his shoulder, and the servant next to the wall immediately handed him a white handkerchief. The man’s face faded to its original color as he loudly blew his nose.

“That will do. That just reminded me of something some twenty-two years ago.”

Another of the men raised an eyebrow at the one who was talking.

“That was quite like my wife when she first married into my family by dowry. From her I learned that the truth cannot be sought purely with logic.”

Lawrence sensed the mood shift as he heard a strange low sound, which he soon realized was the four men laughing together.

“Furthermore, everyday business decisions often defy common logic. Everyone..”

His voice rose like the precursor to a proclamation at round-table meeting.

“May I have the final word?”

“Agreed.”

The other three consented instantly. He then directed his eyes at Lawrence.

“Regarding the topic we’ve just discussed, there’s one thing I wish to ask you, Kraft Lawrence.”

“Very well.”

Lawrence swore that it was blood he was sweating out from his palms.

“What is it that makes you so certain about this? Please share.”

Lawrence’s hand immediately reach into his breast pocket and produced a letter. That was his ace, the card that raised the legend of the wolf up from a simple rumor. This ace was signed by both Keeman and Eve, who were widely known across the Winfield Strait. Eve was even once a noble of the Winfield Kingdom. These two signatures were coupled with the fact that Eve had revealed that the Church had purchased the wolf’s bones.

“The one who wrote me this letter was Fleur von Eiterzentel *Marie* Boland.”

A long name was a stamp of nobility, but only to those who were knowledgeable enough to understand the true meaning of a given name. Two pairs of eyebrows raised at the table, and their gazes transferred to the parchment Lawrence lay before them.

Any merchant doing business in Winfield was sure to know of Eve, who had revealed her full name to him, a mere traveling merchant. The two men quickly exchanged a glance and a third nodded his head slightly. Just as the word “success!” flashed across Lawrence’s mind, however..

“What else?”

“Huh?”

Lawrence almost returned the question, but managed to quickly cover that up with a soft

cough. He cleared his throat several times before extending his uninjured hand toward the table to ask forgiveness for his rudeness. It was one of the gestures drilled into him over his years of negotiation experience, so it came naturally. In truth he was so panicked that his mind had gone blank.

*What else?* The man who seemed to have the most say had answered Lawrence with that question. Wasn't the letter enough? Lawrence had just played his trump card, believing that it was the ideal move to make in already-favorable circumstances. If that wasn't enough, he had no more tricks to pull out of his sleeve. Several stares pierced him from across the table.

"The Wolf and the Eye of Wisdom.. the reputation of two merchants so rare does indeed hold much sway. However, if we are to base a judgment solely on the weights of names, there are others whose advice holds even more sway, I believe. Even out here in the middle of nowhere."

A business negotiation was a merchant's battlefield. Just as a moment of battlefield hesitation could cost a mercenary his life, faltering at a negotiation could cost a merchant a contract. The fact that Lawrence's eyes had begun wandering off to the side after hearing those words meant those veteran merchants seated at the table had slayed him. Indeed, his confidence was gone, and he was no more than a puppet dancing in their strings.

Sighs were heard from around the table. Lawrence watched Pisky open his mouth, but struggle to find the words to say. Lawrence was only further delayed as he fought to regain his composure. If the signatures of Keeman and Eve weren't good enough to win their trust, there was nothing they could do. They had failed. Just as that feeling washed over his heart-

"Lawrence."

A familiar voice uttered a word it never used. Lawrence spun around to face it, and acknowledged that Holo had indeed spoken his name. She stared at him with exasperation in her eyes, and he swore he could hear the sound of a messy table being cleared - no, the sound of a heavy door, just barely opened a crack, being closed once more.

He stared into her eyes despite this sinking feeling that the door of opportunity was closing on them. Those amber eyes with traces of red, with the same expression. Those eyes that always had an answer just behind them, an answer that should be obvious and was already on the tip of his tongue, but was veiled just far enough behind those eyes that he couldn't reach it.

It was always such a simple answer. He just had to convince himself that it wasn't over, and hurry up and find it. *Hurry up and think back on everything that's been said!* He racked his brains and employed every scrap of wisdom he possessed. Time was merciless, but merchants never knew what to give up.

"There *is* more!"

His voice raised in pitch to its utmost limit. His sudden outburst shocked everyone in the room, and they recoiled as they stared at him. Their expressions were like they had witnessed a dead man come back to life, and in a manner of speaking that's just what had happened. A negotiating merchant whose wandering eyes had betrayed his lack of confidence might as well be a rotting corpse.

Lawrence cried out so loudly that he stunned himself back in silence, at a loss for words as his now-attentive audience hung on his next word. His left hand, throbbing with pain, snapped him back out of his over-anxiety and reminded him he was still alive. Then his right hand, being firmly clasped by a third hand, reminded him that he wasn't alone.

"I've seen a wolf."

It lasted but a moment, but the ensuing silence felt like it dragged out for an eternity.

"A wolf?"

"An.. enormous wolf."

He had no real idea why he'd spoken those words. All he knew was that they were the right words, so he spoke them with confidence. In truth he knew they were the answer right from the start. After all, what had the four men at the table told him when they decided to hear him out? They told him they would pay respect to *his* name.

They went out of their way to say that, yet what he produced was a parchment with the names of others. No wonder Holo was exasperated. They didn't want proof, just the reason behind his unwavering conviction. That was what they really wanted.

"I'm traveling for the sake of that wolf.. that giant wolf."

Would they think he'd snapped out of anxiety? Or maybe think he was desperately reaching for attention with a ridiculous claim? Normally, his face would be betraying his anxiety, but since he wasn't lying he had no need to be anxious this time.

"..are you from the north?"

One of the men asked.

"These two are."

Lawrence pointed at Holo and Cole. The four men then narrowed their eyes and stared off into the distance, as if they were trying to focus their eyes on Holo and Cole, both far away in the north.

Pisky seemed agonized over having had no opportunity to speak. Lawrence felt as if he was

standing on thin ice now, not solid ground. Anyone watching them now would probably turn away in fear over what would happen.

The four men closed their eyes and fell into silence. Lawrence stood stock-still and razor-straight, even though he wasn't being supported by any logic.

"Is that so?"

That brief utterance was what finally broke the silence.

"I see. Fate moves in strange ways."

"May God show us His blessing!"

Lawrence couldn't have been the only one who felt those words were a bit ominous. Four men, seated at a round table, whose clothes carried the scent of pepper and saffron, now spoke in elegant and fluid tones.

"No matter how unbelievable it is, the truth does indeed reveal itself some day."

"..huh?"

"We've been waiting a long time. Well, maybe it would be more accurate to say that we've been unable to come to a decision for a long time."

"What kind of decision.."

Pisky and Lawrence both murmured that before exchanging a glance. Their ears may have drooped with age, but the hearing of the four men at the table was not to be underestimated.

"You see, we have indeed received word that the monastery has purchased the wolf's bones. But the consequences of any decision the four of us may make were simply too heavy.. we couldn't base our judgment on just that information, because.."

He stared intently at Lawrence, but despite his serious demeanor he was giving off an almost gentle air.

"..because us old-timers dug that information up with rusty tools, so we couldn't help but doubt its credibility. But if someone younger were to arrive at the same conclusion, without relying purely on deduction, it would give us the reason we need to conclude the information was valid."

"T-then.."

"Indeed. We know the Brondel Monastery is backed into a corner. There is no time for further

delays. But if they truly have purchased the wolf's bones, we've already formulated a plan of our own."

The four men smiled wearily.

"This war's been tough on us old-timers, because people our age always engage in petty tactics."

"That's just it. We have no particular grudge against our present opponent, and this information is a poison potent enough to inflict a lethal wound on them instantly."

The four of them began talking to each other like men acting their age. It was no wonder that Pisky would lower his head as he listened, and Lawrence as well. Holo's head tilted to one side, however, and while Cole seemed visibly relaxed he also seemed to have no clue what was going on.

Lawrence couldn't help but feel bitter as he considered what he had to say next, knowing that he was going to be saying it to someone other than Holo. The four men at the table possessed not only her cunning, but open minds as well.

"Then.."

They had backed Lawrence and his party into a corner, where he had to no choice but say this.

"Please leave it to us."

They were doing this in part to protect themselves, and in part to use someone else to do that job. In Lawrence and the others they saw a group who could substitute for them, and in turn Lawrence and the others now had a path to success. The interpersonal relationships here weren't as simple as one side attacking and the other defending.

The fact that Lawrence was so attracted to an opponent like Holo, who couldn't be handled by conventional means, was perhaps because he admired how they seemed to rise above the rules of society. And of course, he had come here precisely to seize control of the reins.

"Ah, yes, I have another letter with me."

Lawrence took another letter out of his jacket, the one issue the tax decree and stamped with the King's seal.

"This is.. but why do *you* have this..?"

It was his turn to smile now, so he ignored their question, coughed, and continued.

"This decree could lead to the following results."

The four men listened intently to the words Lawrence now spoke after jumping up onto center-stage.

~~~

The most traditional way to evade taxes was to claim one had no money. A king couldn't just force penniless subjects to pay up, and if he rashly seized their property then people would think twice about setting foot in his country anymore.

Under these circumstances, however, everyone would adopt whatever scheme they could to hide their money and make the tax collectors fight for every coin. Hiding money under the floorboards, or golden sculptures inside lead blocks, or basically anything that was easier on the concealer than the consealee.

Transporting large sums of money at once was too obvious, but no would one notice little bits at a time being moved deep into the mountains. There were always too few tax collectors compared to tax payers.

Of course that didn't mean the king, city council, or Church would give up on collecting taxes. The name of God always gave leadership a way to pressure people into paying their taxes, even without relying on a few tax collectors or worrying about how deep underground a person's money was buried.

But such methods were so heavy-handed that they often lead to situations that were disadvantageous to all involved. After all, bashing someone with a stick also harmed the hand of the assailant. Even worse, there were too many conditions and limitations on such shows of power.

Still, the Winfield Kingdom could consider itself somewhat lucky. King Sylvan had only used such forceful methods of taxation when he had no choice left but to do so. That is, until he had to recall and re-mint new coins from the old ones.

Combined with his law forbidding the circulation of the old currency, any money hidden away in bottles, under floorboards, or buried underground was entirely worthless. Digging it back up and melting it for its gold or silver might yield some value, but melting currency wasn't easy or free, and any furnaces were sure to be under constant surveillance.

Because of this, everyone would take their old currency to the mint. The king could then offer them whatever rate exchange rate he wanted for the old coins, while simultaneously imposing a tax on the process.

"From past experience I can deduce that the monastery has cash. The king surely know this, and so chose this method. Since even merchants know to convert cash into merchandise, it's

quite unlikely that they'd keep all of their funds in the form of certificates."

"The King's probably using this chance to take down the monastery, since they have a lot of influence in Winfield, and hopes to boot us out with it. On the one hand, he can take its land in lieu of taxes, and on the other hand that would passively get rid of us since that's what we're here for."

"He's probably trying to seize control of the wool trade as well."

"It's a distinct possibility. Nowhere else moves as much wool as this monastery does. So long as he controls it, he can control the prices as he wishes as well."

Lawrence and Pisky stood at either side of the round table, with Holo and Cole standing next to Lawrence. In the center of the table lay a tree-diagram of the possibilities that Lawrence and Cole had spent the night deducing. Even if one wasn't clever enough to improvise such things, they could still ponder over the details carefully and discover something useful.

"If they hadn't bought the wolf's bones, they'd surely be able to gather up what little cash they had to comply with the King's decree. But since they don't have enough.."

"They'll probably just pretend they did."

Pisky spoke up and finished his thought.

"They'll probably just fill some crates with stones, and fling them into a chasm somewhere to pretend there was an accident during transport. The shepherds surely know of places they could set up such an 'accident,' and if there isn't a convenient chasm there's sure to be a marsh."

Everyone nodded at the explanation, and then one of the men at the table spoke up.

"So approximately how much money will they have to pay?"

Even if they were brilliant, a group of elder merchants who'd been away from their businesses for so long would need a better analogy than a simple number of coins.

"It'll probably only be partly in coins.. I'd say ten to fifteen crates of about this size."

"In such thick snow, it would even be difficult to move them on a sleigh, so I'm guessing they'll make it a team expedition."

No one would butt in when a traveling merchant was offering his insights on issues of transportation.

Lawrence continued.

“I doubt they’d use a team small enough to completely obscure.”

“I see.. so if we were to reveal our awareness of the tax decree, they’d be incapable of taking any action. If we offered them a helping hand at that point to evade the taxes, they’d probably be open to negotiations.”

The man used a tone of voice one might use when considering which direction a cornered rat would try to flee. Lawrence recalled being manipulated like such a rat back in the port town of Gerube. By comparison, his mundane existence selling and buying in trade seemed as peaceful as a life in a remote village.

It wasn’t that Lawrence had strong opinions about any particular business methods. But this discussion was an entirely different kind of gamble that he’d experienced, which made it possible for him to somehow keep a clear mind.

“If we’re going to make a move, we’d best do it soon. If we make them panic too much they might do something drastic and lose it all. After all, no matter how desperate they get, they’re still God’s servants.. they might just opt to die in God’s name rather than live on in shame.”

“And there are still those among them worthy of our respect. We’re not thieves, so we have to handle this situation carefully.”

There was a saying, “the castle atop the hill cannot escape the eye.” It was meant to convey that a person of high status should act in ways befitting that status. At the very least, the four men seated at the table didn’t need to hear those words.

“Then let’s reveal the truth to the monks who’ve gathered here. Is that unpleasant duo still lingering around here?”

“I’ll go find out. If we can’t find them, should we tell the others?”

“No, let’s not. Those two are the main branches’ minions. Tell the Prior. He should be performing his daily rituals right now, and at least he’s capable of mounting a horse.”

A brief round of laughter swept across the room, since this place was full of monks too fat to ride on horseback.

“Very well.”

Pisky lowered his head and replied politely.

“I do doubt that slow-acting sanctuary council’s ability to reach a quick decision and move the crates immediately, but for the sake of caution let’s have men posted in each of the main inns and buildings when day breaks.”

“The royal court does have blood relatives of a few high-ranking monks. With such connections the monastery might be anticipating things somewhat, so we mustn’t let our guard down.”

“Exactly right. However, things should work out in our favor.”

“May God grant us His blessing!”

And with that, the meeting came to a close.

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It was like the entire branch had fallen into a sea of flames. In fact, it was so chaotic that even that description no longer felt adequate.

The Prior, named Roy, had accidentally dropped the Bible he was prayerfully clutching when he heard about the King’s decree, and then accidentally knocked over a candle stand while picking it back up. His anxiety was just that obvious.

Given that the blizzard had already stopped, Prior Roy immediately arranged for horses and had five stable hands and two monks join him on a torch-lit night ride speeding over the snow to the main monastery.

The monks at this branch certainly had the calculating minds one would expect them to have. They had already gathered in the rooms of the alliance’s officers to appeal to them in case there was an emergency.

Pisky and his comrades swiftly discussed and drew up a list of demands they had for the village they wished to create, as well as all other matters related to the planned immigration. They had all banded together to work hard toward their common goal. At least, that was the impression they gave Lawrence.

For his part, he was to reveal every little detail he knew about the wolf’s bones, and handle the evaluation of that information. The connections from D’Jean Company all the way to the Diva Company, the flow of cash, negotiated merchandise, and how the legend of the wolf’s bones was received in Gerube.. even Holo and Cole pitched in all they had learned over their journey.

Everyone was knee-deep in preparation for the ensuing battle with the monastery. The whole branch was shrouded in a mysteriously thrilling atmosphere. Holo left in the middle of their discussions to inform Huskins of the situation.

It was late and Lawrence was already quite fatigued when she returned with Huskins’ message that he was sorry he couldn’t be of help.. but that news only made it impossible for Lawrence to sleep if he wanted to.

“We truly do not possess power any longer.”

Dawn was already breaking when Holo uttered those words of self-ridicule. Every person present had completed the task assigned to them, and been enlightened as to the situation. The people who were able to make the best use of all those results were also present.

Holo’s voice sounded a bit forlorn, but frank. Even her sharp fangs and razor-like claws probably weren’t powerful enough to stem the tide of this immense gathering of minds. Humans had a knack for harnessing the enormous potential of people of various ethnicities and background in the name of a common cause - something that no other animal attempted.

A faint smile crossed her face as she watched the members of the alliance scattered throughout the room, all overcome with fatigue and soundly asleep. She might even be feeling a bit envious.

“Heh. The moment I grow weary I become sentimental.”

Cole was completely spent and had tucked up into a ball against a wall, so Lawrence wrapped an arm around Holo’s shoulders and pulled her head in close. The clear blue sky outside the window had an almost magnetic beauty to it. If there was ever to be a day where everything would go smoothly and according to plan, this would surely be it.

Holo soon dozed off as well, and before Lawrence realized it, he too was asleep. Yet someone was calling out loudly from the monastery’s entrance, so Lawrence wasn’t sure if he was dreaming.

“They’re here! The main monastery’s representatives are here!”

The main monastery was constructed on a grassy plain ideal for building. Anyone could tell when a group was spotted heading in from the direction of that plain, and that it meant they were from the main monastery.

Once Lawrence lifted his head and realized he wasn’t dreaming, he jumped up and ran to the entrance. Many merchants were already there on both sides of the path, all staring off into the vast grassy plain along the road extending straight to the main monastery.

“..They’re still not here?”

“Shh!”

A few such exchanges were repeated in the crowd before they all fell silent. Then the heavy sound of a horse trotting was heard, and the alliance officials exited one after the other, looking like they’d been waiting forever.

Though Lawrence and the others cleared a path for them, they were still almost entirely surrounded by naturally-curious merchants. The sound of the approaching horses' hooves kept getting louder until they suddenly halted. They had stopped in front of the inn.

A large horse led by two men stood before them.

"I am a messenger representing the Abbot."

The large man spoke from atop the horse's back, dressed in a robe embellished with fur patterns that even covered his feet. His hood was pulled so low over the face that it was barely visible. But his outfit wasn't the issue.

What struck everyone as odd was the fact that he was alone with his two drivers, yet spoke with such a lofty attitude from atop his horse's back. Everyone present, including Lawrence, had expected all of the monastery's officials, including the Abbot, to show up blue-faced.

"Thank you for coming. Let us move inside first."

In contrast to the other merchants who were clamoring endlessly in the area, an elegantly-dressed man addressed the messenger with an etiquette that was obviously well-practiced over the years. In fact, the inn was already preparing to receive their guest. The smells of food that drifted out from the inn was enough to torment those who had stayed up all night on empty stomachs.

"No need."

He replied firmly before their very eyes, then he pulled out a letter, affixed it to the riding crop fastened to his saddle, and handed it over to the alliance members as if it was a royal order.

"This is the Abbot's reply: As God's servants, we shall not submit to foreign heathens. Never! We shall pay our taxes to the king, and continue praying to the Lord as always."

The moment the confused alliance representative received the letter, the Abbot's messenger struck his horse with the riding crop. Seeing his mount turn about, his drivers gripped hastily on the reins. He didn't even bother bidding farewell.

All Lawrence and the others heard was the casual trotting of the horse's hooves, and all they were shown was its rear. In their shock they had all fallen silent.

"What in the world is going on?"

It was unclear who murmured that, but it didn't matter. It was echoed exactly what everyone present was thinking. The letter that had been passed to the four men of the round table was opened before their very eyes. Once one man read it, it was passed to the next until they had

all done so. All that was left on their faces after reading it was pale confusion.

“How would it be possible.. for them to still have funds left over, even after paying the tax?”

That was all anyone needed to hear to guess what the letter said. A commotion stirred up as everyone began speaking with the people next to them. But no useful conclusion came from this clamor. Everyone knew that that monastery was just putting up a futile struggle.

“It’s not possible.. what *are* they thinking? Do they believe the king will protect them so long as they pay his taxes willingly? Of all people they should know he won’t grant them the least bit of protection..”

The king had been extorting the monastery all along, though it hadn’t been in order to pave the way for his latest decree. Surely they wouldn’t willingly put their faith in him now.

Like a drop of oil that had fallen into water, chaos was now gradually spreading. There was a distinct possibility that they hadn’t purchased the wolf’s bones, but still had a stash of money with which they could cover the taxation.

Even so, under the circumstances they had no reason at all to be so unyielding in front of the alliance. Having more sources of emergency funding was the wiser course. Could they have come up with some clever new strategy, or had they reached some sort of agreement with the king?

Everyone was busily predicting the possibilities when a merchant overlooking the chaos from one remote corner suddenly raised his voice.

“Since they’ve just indicated they’ll be paying the tax, doesn’t that mean they’ll be transporting the money? If we’re sure they’re unable to pay the tax, all we have to do is confirm whether or not they have the coin, right?”

Most of the people gathered there were convinced the monastery couldn’t pay the tax, but even if they really did pay it the potential problems they would suffer were plain to see. They would probably have to fill crates up with pebbles, and so if the alliance was ready to take a gamble then betting on that likelihood seemed the wisest course.

“Or maybe they’re planning on faking an accident while we’ve been thrown into chaos?”

Another merchant added his thoughts.

“Could be.. it would explain why they came to their decision so hastily: they don’t want to give us time to think.”

A chorus of voices in the room rang out, “that must be it.” Lawrence looked at the officials

standing at the far end of the crowd; they didn't seem to agree with the crowd. And neither did Lawrence.

“Does the letter state when they plan on paying the tax?”

It wouldn't be a surprise if they *had* written a precise date, if they were plotting to confuse the alliance with a brash attitude while they made their winning move. In fact, that seemed to be what was happening.

The officials were still holding the letter with bitter looks on their faces, and Lawrence knew exactly how they felt. The monastery probably *wanted* them to read out the date. But there was no way the men could hide it now, with the situation being this out of hand.

“Today at noon, following the path Saint Hironus walked through the snowy plains.”

“Like I said! They're practically daring us to come after them!”

“We can't hesitate if they're planning on leaving at noon. The area around the Sirelli hill is rife with marshes - the ideal place to fake an accident.”

“Let's go! It takes daring to win profit!”

A wave of cheers brought the din to an end; perhaps everyone was just giddy from not having slept in order to complete their tasks.

Lawrence hadn't noticed when, but Holo had already come to his side and was clutching a corner of his sleeve. But he had no idea what to do. Even the alliance officials wore confused looks, and he wouldn't have had any better ideas.

However, he was not a member of the alliance and so he was able to somewhat objectively view the situation. And as he did, it quickly became obvious what was likely going on: the monastery had set up a trap for them.

If the heat of the moment led them to confuse daring with the pursuit of profit, then they might just waylay the monastery as they transported the crates, banners held aloft. At best they would discover that the crates were filled with rocks and rejoice.. but if the crates *were* filled with money, what then?

The alliance would be cast into despair. Worse, since the monastery had no obligation to them to reveal the contents of their crates, a dispute would surely follow. The monastery could easily claim the alliance had planned to steal the money meant for the king - an unforgivable act.

Or, they could simply claim that the alliance had stolen the money as it was being transported to the king's palace, and the situation would then escalate with each party clinging to their own

stories. Any bloodshed would simply be indisputable evidence which further bolstered the monastery's claims.

The king, who would be the one passing judgment, could view this as his chance to be rid of the alliance that was economically interfering in domestic affairs. Obviously he would rule in favor of the monastery. They would essentially corner the alliance and leave them with no choice but to cave into their demands.

The alliance would be forced to pay the tax for the monastery and purchase their wool at a high price. It wouldn't matter how the monastery chose to extort all the money they could from the alliance. Lawrence also knew why alliance officials had to keep quiet about this. Unless they opened the crates, it would be a show of opposition to their membership that could only cause disunity.

And so, the monastery had reversed the alliance's move to force them into a dead end, and wait for them to buckle. But the alliance officials had to stay inactive on the sidelines, since they too were members of the alliance. They couldn't divide their ranks, because they all shared the same goal.

Since that was the case, shouldn't Lawrence - a non-member with a different goal - raise his voice? He had his reasons to fear them falling into a trap. He would be troubled if the monastery had planned this trap for the alliance and they fell for it.

Maybe the monastery thought they could lead them by the nose if they grasped their weakness, but the alliance was an organization of merchants who prioritized profit above all else. The very moment they decided the gains weren't worth the effort, or the ends didn't justify the means, they would bow out.

Judging from the fact that their top brass - who journeyed in all-black carriages - weren't present here, it was obvious that this deal wasn't a priority for the alliance. That meant that the moment they realized this was a trap, they'd haphazardly deal with the consequences and beat a hasty retreat.. and probably never return.

If that happened, who could possibly protect the monastery? They might gain some temporary stability, but without the alliance all they had left was sheep's wool to sell, and no buyers. If they optimistically thought the price of wool would inflate once more, it made sense for them to take this action. Anyone would believe that a drop in prices was temporary when merchandise had always sold well, so of course they'd be optimistic.

But it probably wouldn't take long for them to collapse after that. And when they did, the king would expropriate their land and disband their membership. It wasn't tough to see that the land would be carved up between the various aristocrats to buy their support, and that wars would inevitably break out over the sizes of those allotments.

In the outbreak of war, those who fled were always the people who lived in the area. And so, it was people like Huskins who would be left with no choice but to evacuate when that time came.

Holo and Cole were also looking nervous as they stood next to Lawrence. Holo could trounce anyone with her sharp fangs and claws, but relying on such an out-dated force wouldn't change modern trends. So Lawrence had to speak up against this group of men, who had already teamed up in order to march off through the snowy plains.

“This may well be a trap set up by the monastery.”

The people who had been thinking the same thing, but staying silent, looked extra-nervous when they heard him.

“And if we go now, we'll be playing straight into their hands.”

Upon adding this second line, everyone stopped what they were doing and directed their attention at Lawrence.

“How so?”

“If we open the crates and find them filled with money, it won't do the alliance any good.”

“That may be true, but it's just as likely we'll be playing into their hands if we *don't* open the crates. We've tried all your ideas so far, but none of them helped.. and now a chance like this shows up? What else can this be but God's will? If we let this chance slip by us, all of our efforts will be for naught!”

“Yeah!”

A wave of cheers rose up. It was clear who they felt was the coward, and who being brave. It was rare, after all, to live in a time where wise men were as valued as brave ones.

“And even if it *is* a trap, we'll still have to get out of here. The idea right from the start was that we'd pack up and leave if we couldn't buy the land, so it's the same either way. So how can we *not* drop everything to run to the profit!?”

“That's right!”

The crowd shouted and surged forward. Lawrence, Holo and Cole were pushed up toward the wall. Lawrence just barely noticed the alliance officials behind the blood-thirsty mob, who apparently didn't intend to stop them.

“Hold up.. come to think of it, you're not a member of our alliance, are you?”

His blood ran cold, but it wasn't due to the weather. Anyone who traveled for a living found that kind of line more terrifying than a wolf's howl. Lawrence looked around him, and saw a gang of men he wasn't affiliated with.

"You must be trying to stall us to buy yourself time."

The very moment one was accused of being a spy, it became practically impossible to clear that accusation. The only response the accusers would accept was an admission of guilt.

"Hey.. so are you or are you not?"

Beads of sweat rolled down Lawrence's cheeks and his eyes wavered. He had a knife buckled to his belt, but he was doomed in such a large group of people. And the moment he pulled out a knife, he'd lose what little chance he had to prove his innocence.

What could he do? He fought to think of a solution. Huskins had left everything up to him, because he considered the human world too complicated and his own hooves too powerless. Because of that, Lawrence was about to be crushed by a group of people the moment the situation reversed.

The men began to close around Lawrence and his companions, and they probably had no avenue to escape. Was this really the end? He shielded Cole and Holo as he desperately hunted for a solution, no matter how paradoxical or absurd.

If he couldn't stop the alliance from taking this course of action, there was practically no way to save the monastery from walking the path to their own destruction. Huskins would lose the second home he had worked so hard to build, and all Holo would be left with was the realization that her kind no longer had a place in the world.

Naturally, there was no way he'd stand back and watch that happen. But all that was left was for someone to reach out to them, and the mob would rush to their assault. They were cornered. Even Holo showed a look of submission, and raised her hand to her chest.

Was this the only crude way left for those beings, once revered as gods, to use their power? Lawrence could feel how much this pained her, and it made him want to cry out with all his might at his own helplessness.

Huskins was going to have to leave, and take countless sheep with him-

"Wha-?"

Just before an avalanche of men rushed at them, a vision of a large herd of sheep flowing across the land flashed across his eyes.

“Please hold on!”

He shouted out.

“Wait up! I’ve got it, a way to verify what’s in the crates!”

Silence flooded the room a split second before all hell had broken loose. He had made his breakthrough at the very last possible instant.

“What was that?”

This was the decisive moment, if he wanted to pacify this mob that was about to turn violent. And one of the alliance officials seemed to perceive this, immediately taking the initiative to speak.

“Hold on a minute! Let’s hear what he has to say first!”

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that things were one step away from becoming a bloodbath. Lawrence breath in deeply, exhaled, and breathed in deeply once more before speaking.

“Any trap would be completely useless if *we’re* not the ones to fall into it.”

Another of the officials jumped in.

“What do you mean?”

“If they’ve planned to set up the alliance, then we just have to let someone else spring the trap, and then it’ll be totally ineffective.”

“Hmm.. so you mean you’ll go check the crates in our place?”

Such a thing would be useless, since Lawrence could no more prove to the monastery that he wasn’t in the alliance, than he could to prove to the alliance that he wasn’t a spy. So of course he shook his head in response.

“If not you, then who?”

Lawrence wasn’t very confident in his own idea, but a certain person was helping him rediscover his courage and maintain his composure.. the very person that now held his hand firmly, Holo. He wouldn’t be in this mess if he was only looking out for number one.

“The sheep.”

Everyone again stopped for a moment after that brief utterance.

“..So we do still have another option!”

The situation had once again reversed.

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It goes without saying that sheep are the ideal representatives of the gentle herbivores. Yet, as Norah the shepherdess once mentioned, they do not understand the meaning of restraint.

The same applied to Huskins, the Golden Sheep. Once his mind was made up, nothing could stop him. He had even taken to eating his own kind’s flesh in order to blend into human society.. as if he thought nothing of it.

A flock of sheep would march right off a cliff under a shepherd’s guidance. People frequently suffered injuries when they were swept up into such flocks.

The monastery had laid a trap, and even prepared for a bloody battle with the alliance when they came to spring that trap, in order to blame them. But even a band of mercenaries would be powerless to stem the tide of a massive flock of sheep, much less the monastery.

Lawrence and his companions had themselves witnessed just how massive the flocks were here at this branch of the monastery, not to mention the skill of their shepherds. That’s why not even a single mouth opened in opposition to Lawrence’s proposal.

“..And that’s basically it.”

Lawrence had just finished explaining the plan to Huskins, who sat next to the furnace like some immobile rock that had gathered moss, when he finally slowly moved once.

“You are asking me to use sheep.. to attack humans?”

“More or less.”

Holo stood next to the door with a listless expression. Cole had stayed behind at the alliance’s inn, essentially as a hostage.

“Will you lend us your strength, Mr. Huskins?”

No one was better-suited for a plan involving sheep. The only obstacle to overcome might be his pride as the Golden Sheep, an existence hailed as a god in days gone by. But in this era, the power of the ancients no longer held the sway it once did - he couldn’t act on his own volition, and had to use his power in accordance with the rules of men.

Huskins had been reduced to the role of a pawn, and he couldn’t even be considered a powerful supporter from the shadows. The pain of knowing this was completely different from

the pain of being confronted by it. Even Lawrence felt stung the first time someone had dismissed his name, only to reverse their attitude when they heard the name of his guild. Those were the moments that made one realize just how little they were worth - just a speck in a vast ocean.

Huskins tossed a piece of wood into the stove, and the flames danced high.

“Haha.. so it’s come to this at last.”

His words both made it seem like he was enjoying his fallen state, and that he was even more straightforward and accepting than expected. Even after taking the form of a human and crossing the point of no return, he could laugh such things off. Watching his last lines of defense crumble away like this was both painful and beautiful to behold.

And yet, after hearing his words, Holo interjected as she leaned against the door.

“Have you forgotten who it was who asked for my companion’s assistance?”

He turned his broad neck toward her and stared at her with piercing eyes as the corners of his lips rose.

“Holo.”

As Lawrence called out, Huskins shifted his gaze to Lawrence and spoke in high spirits.

“It’s fine. After all, only a man understands the beauty of decadence, right?”

He was once responsible for leading the wild sheep that roamed the grassy meadows, but now he had to protect their temporary place of refuge. His sense of responsibility and strong will had enveloped him like a suit of armor, even covering his emotions. There was no room for pain, sadness or revulsion. He had to bear these things and stubbornly push forward.

He was the sheep’s representative, so hearing that one dignified line from him made it clear that this monk-like shepherd was capable of appreciating beauty, and was indeed a being of flesh and blood. Holo seemed to feel slighted, and wanted to open her mouth to retort, but that line was apparently enough to keep her quiet.

Lawrence quickly reached out his arm to support Huskins when he noticed his desire to get up.

“Then you’re willing to lend us your support?”

He was slightly shorter than Lawrence when he stood up, but his strong and sturdy frame gave off an air of authority. His curly silver hair and beard shook as if each strand was electrified. In that instant Lawrence beheld the splendor of Huskins’ true form.

“Of course. Who else but me could perform this task?”

He lightly took his shepherd’s staff, causing the bell affixed to it to chime pleasantly.

“I thank you dearly. With this, I’ll finally have a role in this new world.”

Lawrence could only smile wistfully at that response. Huskins then turned back to look at Holo while he spoke.

“We can no longer act as freely as we once did, but..”

He then looked back at his hand, before his eyes finally settled on the wood in the stove that had finally begun to burn.

“But we still have places to call home, and can still find a purpose just like this. You haven’t even seen your hometown yet, so don’t go looking like you’ll burst into tears at any moment. Don’t go troubling this young man like that.”

Her eyes widened, and it was clear even through her hood that her ears had sprung up stiffly in irritation. Lawrence figured her tail was probably swollen to a great size as well. Despite that anger all she could manage as Huskins left the room was a soft murmur.

“To think a mere sheep would be so bold as to discipline me.”

Apparently there were things that only she and Huskins could understand. Their eyes may have only met for a moment, but it seemed they had read each other’s minds. Lawrence led Huskins to the alliance inn, with Holo trailing them a few moments later. When they arrived, everyone took one look at Huskins and seemed to agree that he was up to the task.

The plan proceeded smoothly from there, and a flock of sheep seemed to have been conjured up in the blink of an eye. The monks who remained at the branch seemed puzzled over why sheep were being led out at such an hour.

The sound of the flock’s marching hooves rang loudly to the heavens as they left, like the thunderous clamor of an earthquake. Huskins, with staff in hand, stood alone before that herd. Lawrence and Holo held hands as they watched his back march away from them.

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## Epilogue

A team of horses kicked up snow as they sped off to disappear over the horizon. Their purpose was to make it to the monastery's main branch and bear witness to the final battle about to unfold there.

The rider at the forefront held a powerful weapon at his bosom which took the entire night to forge. It was a weapon sharper than any other, thanks to the vital truth that Huskins carried with him. It wasn't likely to take much time or effort to settle this conflict.

One couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for the monastery's leadership as they pictured them falling into despair as they trudged along a path of trodden snow. The decision that leadership had made was quite worthy of respect, being the best option of the few that were left to them.

Had Lawrence not been the one to mention the possibility that the monastery was trapping them, another member of the alliance would have been forced to do so. At that point the alliance would have been divided to the point where they couldn't properly operate.

Then, even if a group headed out after they extensively debated whether or not to confirm the contents of the crates, it would not have been a very large group. That was probably what the monastery had been aiming for.

Pisky had been in the first team to vanish over the horizon and was probably already in the extravagant halls of the main monastery, reciting the alliance's proposal to them.

It turned out that the crates were full of stones. That meant the monastery very likely had a stash of money hidden away that was originally meant for taxes or something like the wolf's bones, which couldn't be made public. Regardless of why they were carrying stones, it would be praiseworthy to inform the king of their intentions.

But the monastery wasn't stupid, and they knew when it was time to back down. Since they were out of options, all they could do now was find a way to surrender with dignity and keep on stubbornly surviving as they always had.

Lawrence drew in a long, thin breath of air, then slowly exhaled it. The snowy plains looked like a sea that had been frozen in time. Walking under the clear blue sky all alone on that snow felt rather pleasant.

No one accompanied Lawrence. As he expected, Holo had picked up her coat and mounted a horse to join the first team to the monastery before anyone could refuse her. Since the monastery had no choice but to reveal their treasures once they were cornered, her tail was probably swishing excitedly the entire time.

That snowy path, trampled by countless sheep, was as easy to walk as one paved in stone. Lawrence reached the hill named Sirelli in no time.

One could circle the crown of the hill and glimpse the entirety of the path that wound around the hill from the north to the east. It might be easier to simply say that there was no better vantage point to witness the utter failure of the monastery's plans.

"Longswords and bows won't have even the slightest effect."

Several red stains could be seen on the path, left behind by those who had panicked as they readied themselves for battle. But their efforts against such a vast number of sheep were as futile as any efforts Holo and Huskins might take to confront humanity.

Everyone had fallen unconscious around the sled, having been surrounded and then overrun by the immense herd. Indeed, they must have been planning to turn around and attack the alliance when they came to survey the crates, and then pin the blame on them. They were simply over-armed, even if they were transporting crates of money.

If it had come down to combat between men, there would surely have been many casualties. Lawrence surveyed the scene before him when Huskins, who was just then gathering the sheep along the path, noticed and approached him.

"What ho!"

What a leisurely greeting.

"I'm quite happy to see you unharmed and in high spirits."

"Haha.. of course I am. I truly didn't expect to be able to resolve this with my own hands."

"You did deal the decisive blow."

"Is that so.. we stand above humans, and humans stand above sheep. But times change. Someday that order shall be reversed."

The monastery clearly never imagined in their wildest dreams that the alliance would send a flock of sheep. Indeed, if Lawrence didn't know about Huskins he wouldn't have been able to picture something like this.

"Oh yes, where did that young wolf go off to?"

"You mean Holo? She should be in the monastery's treasure vault right about now."

"Haha! Is that so.."

After laughing a while, Huskins' gaze dropped to his feet. Seeing that made Lawrence respond.

"Is something wrong?"

"Hmm? Oh.. it's nothing.. just that I've been treating that wolf like a kid, when it seems that I'm the child here."

He narrowed his eyes and stared off into the distance. Lawrence could see a pleased smile under his beard.

"Hardship makes people cherish one another. I can't help but wonder if I've started belonging to another group."

"..Do you mean.."

"That's alright.. it's good if you take my meaning, but don't say it aloud. Wolf and sheep will remain wolf and sheep, that's just the natural order of things."

Huskins exhaled deeply, almost as if sighing. He then inhaled, gave his bell a shake, and ran off to gather the sheep that were already beginning to stray in every direction. After Lawrence watched him do this for a while, Huskins finally turned to him and spoke again.

"Just how long do you plan to ignore the natural order?"

Lawrence shot him a sidelong glance, only to discover Huskins' narrowed eyes watching his sheepdog. He scratched his head before slowly replying.

"I'm a merchant, so probably until there's no more profit to be had."

Completely practical answers would always seem like jokes. Huskins burst into laughter after a moment of silence.

"That was a foolish question. The same is true for me.. though I'm a sheep, I'm oddly attached to that sheepdog."

"Why did you ask me such a thing?"

Huskins intentionally split open his mouth to reveal his teeth and widen his grin. From his profile, he looked like a veteran soldier who had survived hundreds of battles.

"I'm trying to decide which side to tell."

"..About what?"

“This place is where my companions gather, so information naturally flows here.”

Huskins was a sheep. He had told Lawrence that his companions were still scattered everywhere, which would mean that information from a huge area would surely gather here. He looked Lawrence square in the eyes, reflecting a profoundness that only someone of countless years could show.

“I heard that wolf say that you people were headed to an ancient place - Yoitsu, was it?”

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

“I’ve heard that name before, and once more recently.”

Lawrence didn’t talk, but simply urged Huskins to continue with his eyes. Since Huskins knew Holo was looking for her hometown, he couldn’t possibly be unaware of how important any news would be. And yet he seemed hesitant to reveal any to Holo, which implied he had a reason.

“That name was among the tumultuous news my companions brought with them.”

Lawrence’s heart was beating faster. He could more or less guess what kind of news it had to be.

“Our king’s tax decree, and those bones you believe the monastery may have purchased.. they may have some connection with this news, because-”

A strong gust of wind swept up the freshly-fallen snowflakes, and they danced and obscured Lawrence’s view of Huskins as he finished his statement. And so, Lawrence never saw the expression on Huskins’ face, though he could pretty much guess what it was based on what he said.

Huskins then began to walk toward the hill to gather the rest of his flock, only pausing long enough to turn back and speak once more.

“I wish you two the best of luck..”

His expression remained calm as he looked at Lawrence as if he was something too bright to see. He turned away as a smile spread across his face.

“..And thank you.”

He then walked off, and with his practiced shepherd’s skills he took control of his flock as though Lawrence wasn’t even there. Lawrence watched his back as he drew in a long, deep breath, then turned around and walked off as well.

*I wish you two the best of luck.* That was the farewell one would give to those who were about to embark on a journey, so his words were enough to send Lawrence off. Lawrence wouldn't even find it strange if Huskins confirmed that what he said was true.

This was an era where such incidents were common, usually took place in distant countries, and were treated only as drinking subjects in taverns. How could Lawrence possibly have predicted that an existence so important to him would be caught up in such a thing?

As he walked along the snowy path he couldn't help but want to narrow his eyes; to guard against the sunlight reflected off of it, yes, but also because something else made him want to scrunch them up even more forcefully.

Two people could be seen in the snow beside that narrow path that was beaten down by sheep's hooves leading back toward the monasterial branch.

"What's the situation?"

The two paused for a moment after being addressed with such a question, then pressed onward through the difficult-to-cross snow. Maybe they felt like kicking that snow like children, rather than travel along the more convenient path. As he approached them he discovered that Holo and Cole's cheeks had become red from the cold.

"How did it turn out?"

Holo kicked up snow high into the air as she walked, with Cole following behind her. After a moment, this was how she replied.

"What is your guess?"

"They were fake."

Maybe that was too quick of a reply, judging from the look of displeasure she flashed him before she turned to him.

"Why would you think they were fake?"

"Because I wouldn't want to see you cry."

Her lips turned up into a smile as she purposely shrugged, kicking a leg up high.

"Were they real or fake, I would not have lost control of my emotions. I am the Wisewolf Holo, after all."

Lawrence wondered if she had just kicked enough snow to content herself, or simply felt her now-soggy robes were too heavy, but she moved onto the sheep-made path and closer to him.

As she knelt and patted away the snow stuck to her robe, Lawrence suddenly pulled her hood back and touched the back of her neck.

“You put your clothes back on inside out.”

He meant the clothes she wore beneath her robe. He sighed, then grabbed Cole’s hand next to him. It was cold as ice, and his fingers were frozen stiff.

“They *were* fake, weren’t they?”

Holo must have returned from the monastery in her wolf form, hence her clothes being on inside-out. If she was feeling sad, her ears and tail would have betrayed that sadness with honesty. She must have taken her true form and dashed in this cold weather with Cole on her back, because she was displeased.

Lawrence got the feeling that he’d been worried over nothing - that all his anticipation had led to was disappointment.

“They were fake.”

Holo gazed up at the sky as she replied. Cole had been forced to risk frostbite, yet he wasn’t upset. It was strange, no matter how easygoing the lad was. Holo must have revealed her vulnerable side to him prior to discovering the truth about the bones, so that he couldn’t bring himself to get angry at her.

“The odds are great that they are deer bones, from the widest part of a hind leg. They must have been buried underground for a long time.”

“I just wish I could’ve been there to see your reaction when that crate was being opened.”

Cole burst into laughter when he heard that, and Holo stomped on Lawrence’s foot. It was a tranquil moment.. so peaceful that one couldn’t help but wish it could last forever.

“Just what do you think you are doing, wearing such a grin? How disgusting.”

“Never mind that. Let’s hurry back. We still need to put wood in the stove and light a fire.”

She put on a defensive look, but when Holo saw Lawrence walk away she didn’t continue her questioning. Instead she took him by the hand and shouted at him.

“Make sure there is plenty of meat and salt in the pot!”

Her practical response brought a smile to his face, but his eyes weren’t focused on his surroundings. He was lost in thought over what Huskins had told him. If it was true, then Lawrence had just caught but a small glimpse of a much more frightening bigger picture. And

yet, Huskins choose to tell *him* and not Holo.

If this place was meant to be protected by Huskins, what place was Lawrence meant to protect? The image of Huskins' back surfaced in his mind, as the man clutched his staff and led his sheep in order to defend their mutual home.

The sky was a clear blue. Lawrence gripped the hands of his two precious companions tightly as they returned to the shepherd's dormitory.

