



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*

Volume 11

狼 と 香 辛 料

Spice and Wolf

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支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Merchant
meats spicy
wolf.

狼と香料

XI Side Colors II



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Side Colors II

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉十

Jyuu Ayakura





"This way, I will never forget your smiling face."

Holo's tail swelled up softly,
and she tightened the grip of her hand slightly.

Wolf and Golden Promise

Seeing Holo's sleeping face,
Lawrence could only let out a soft sigh,
and get out of bed.



The story all began because of a map.



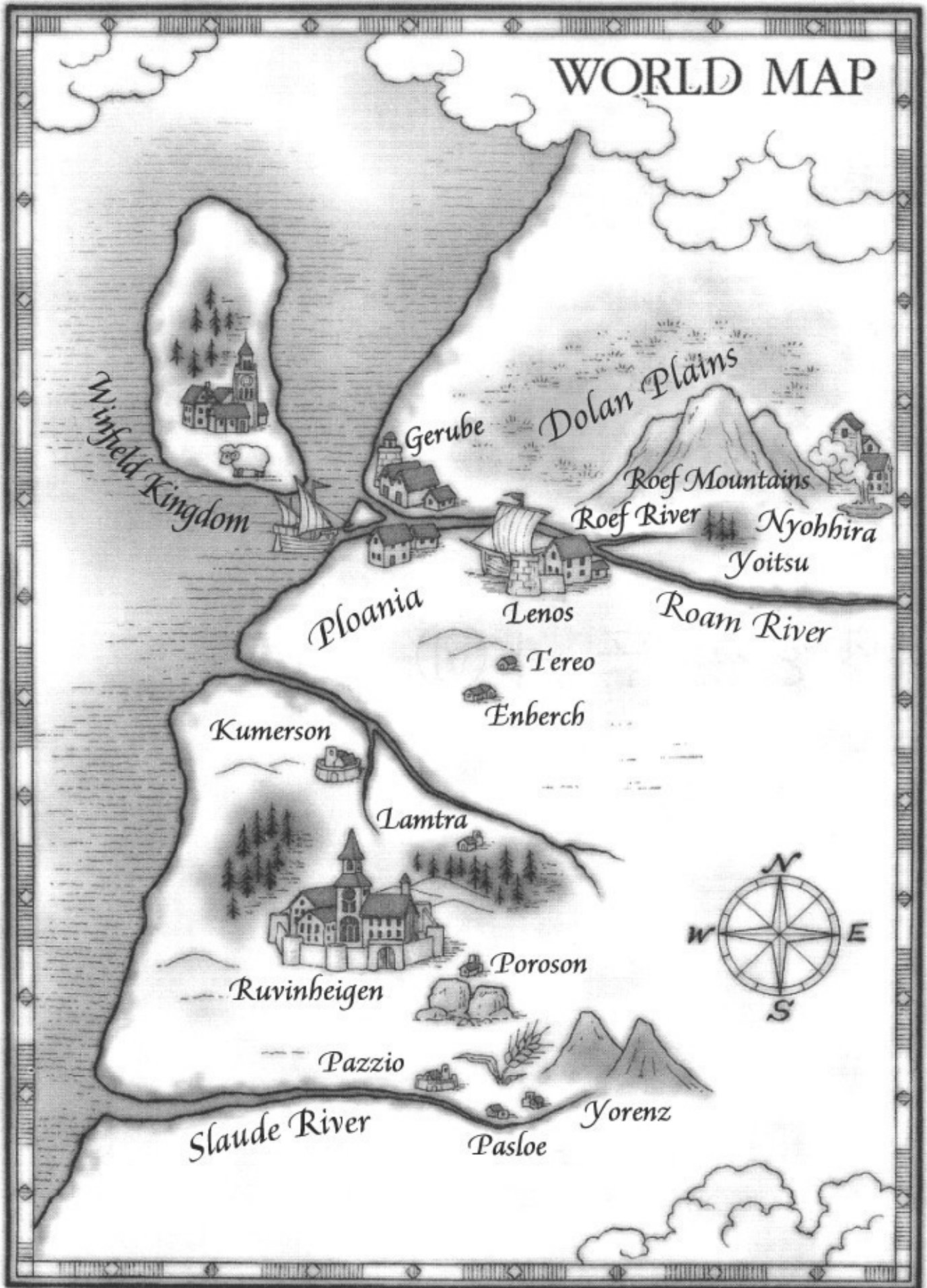
Wolf and Grass-Colored Detour

*"I know my feet aren't planted firmly yet.
If I could step out of this window frame, I even get
feeling that I would fly off into the sky just like that."*

Fleur said, narrowing her eyes as she gazed
toward the dazzling, sun-drenched central courtyard.

The Black Wolf's Cradle





Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ㊦

Side Colors II

Spice and Wolf

Volume 11 - SIDE COLORS II

*Translation & Editing by
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

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The Wolf and the Golden Promise

If you laid dough out on a table, traced a line through it with your finger, poured water through the groove, and planted trees around it, you'd see what he was seeing right now from the seat of his wagon. He swallowed some saliva after realizing that he hadn't eaten fresh bread in a while. It had been three days since they left the city, so good food was already a distant memory.

In days past, he would cross hills with naught but a loaf of salty, slightly-moldy bread, so it now felt like a luxury having decent bread, wine and a bit of an appetizer. He kept telling himself that, but his wallet had been a bit more bloated than usual. It was tough not to spoil himself on the finer things. This was the most luxurious trip he'd taken in his seven year career.

"Chicken legs."

So spoke his companion, perhaps because she had heard him swallowing. Her face was wrapped in a fox fur muffler, but the piece of fur she was grooming in in her lap wasn't fox fur, but a wolf's tail.

Wolves usually had shorter and poorer-quality fur, but hers was top-quality. It was so warm at night it seemed enchanted. Like a perfectionist, she even sometimes nibbled the tip of her tail as she groomed it.

At first Lawrence wondered how expensive such a fur would be on the market, then whether he could sell it for that price. Too bad it wasn't for sale, still being attached to its living owner.

"So that's what you want, is it?"

He replied, only to see her ears flick the air. They were the same color as her tail, and it made her look rather regal to have a pair of sharp, chestnut-colored ears atop her head. Despite the fact that they were inhuman.

That's because Holo, the young girl sitting next to him, wasn't human. She had the ears and tail of a wolf, and her true form was that of a giant wolf controlling the harvest of wheat fields.

"But a live hen would be better."

"Because they lay eggs?"

His thoughts turned to scrambled eggs. She had a knack for making him daydream about food. She called herself the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, and she loved food above humans.

"That unique texture and taste is irresistible.. the feathers are a bit troublesome, mind you."

If she was only joking then he would be smiling. But she wasn't, regrettably. There were sharp fangs under her lips.

"I've never eaten raw chicken, but I know what it takes to cook one."

"Hmm?"

"You clean the feathers, remove the offal, and debone them. Apply seasoning. Boil some vegetables. Fill them with stuffing. Lightly oil their skin so it'll be crispy, and then roast them.. hey, you're drooling."

She slurped away some drool. He'd only heard of that specific dish, never actually tried it, but apparently hearsay was enough for her imagination. The Wisewolf forgot her pride and stared off into space. He'd been with her long enough to get used to that. He wasn't afraid of her on-the-road pestering anymore, either. He couldn't buy what wasn't on sale, so he had the advantage. He cleared his throat and continued.

"But you know, the most delicious are the ones that've been given special treatment."

"Special treatment?"

She stared at him with her reddish-amber eyes. She didn't seem to be acting, and seeing those eyes made him want to spoil her.

"The chickens that are neither male nor female."

"Hmm?"

Despite having lived for centuries, the Wisewolf seemed to have never heard of this. But rather than being agitated, she eagerly urged him to continue.

"Go on?"

Not expecting this, he cleared his throat and continued.

"The young ones that've been castrated."

"But.. why.."

"They grow up to be even more tender and juicy than hens. They're not as tough, and their vitality doesn't go into their eggs.. what?"

"Hmm.."

She purposely lowered her line of sight and grinned, baring her fangs.

“Indeed, that does sound rather tasty.”

Her true form was huge; large enough to swallow him whole. So her joking about his most important male parts made him feel particularly vulnerable. He cleared his throat loudly and flicked the reins. Holo laughed, but didn't stay on the offensive. Her tail wagged with every chuckle.

“Worry not, I know you are a capable male when you must be.”

She even revealed those fangs of her as she smiled. As a man, all he could do was smile back; he knew she had him dancing on the palm of her hand, but could do nothing about it.

“Yet..”

“Ow!”

She grabbed his ear, making him instinctively pull the reins and earn a neigh of protest from his horse.

“You are not fit to be called a man, exaggerating so fearlessly because you believe I will not pester you.”

She had read his mind. She finally let go of his ear and put her hand on her waist in displeasure.

“Hmph! And so, I tease you. Describing such tasty food, when all we have to eat is questionable.. I will surely perish!”

With that they were even, strictly speaking, although her last line was taking it a bit too far.

“Look, it may not be sumptuous-looking but the bread we're eating is oat and wheat, not rye. The wine goes down smooth and has a fine aftertaste. And we even have cheese, dried beef, fruits and raisins.. in days past all I would have with me is garlic and onions, so from where I'm sitting this is downright luxurious.”

Despite her tendency to be childish or animalian at times, he was fundamentally cowed by her cleverness. She wasn't the sort to be unreasonable, and yet she was still capable of such outbursts.

“I will die at this rate.”

She turned away sadly and unhappily. Her acting was so unnaturally savage it could be weaponized for the end of days. He glared at her with a look as though he'd bit his own tongue.

It would be his loss if he replied, but ignoring her would become a test of who was more stubborn - he would be the one to fold first. She could read his mind, after all. All he wanted at heart was a pleasant journey with her, and she had no qualms in using that against him.

“Okay, okay.”

“..okay what?”

She replied coldly with her back still turned to him.

“I’m sorry. I’ll buy you a chicken if we see any. But only if we see one along the road while we’re on this trip.”

That was as far as he’d give. He’d never make such an offer if they were in a city unless he couldn’t afford it anyway. It already felt like his mouth was betraying him to offer her this much. Her back remained turned to him as her ears flicked about. It was certain what her sharp mind was calculating - whether this was as far as he’d budge.

“You *do* remember that I can distinguish lies from the truth?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Realllly?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm..”

She fell silent again. He felt like a criminal waiting for her to sentence him, even if it required little thought to know he wasn’t guilty of anything. And yet, he was unable to escape from this absurd situation. In the end, she seemed to realize that his proposal was as far as the situation could be taken before it couldn’t end with a smile.. and so she smiled. So devious! Her rapid changes of mood were enough to charm any man, not just a lonely traveler.

“Well.. but, you..”

“What is it?”

As he slowly started the carriage moving again, she spoke.

“You truly were not lying, were you?”

“..You mean about chickens being castrated?”

“Fool. I meant about buying me a chicken.”

Why was she confirming this so much? It made him feel uneasy, and when she tugged his sleeve that feeling intensified. He immediately became a merchant again.

“Did I say something like-”

“You said so, did you not?”

She moved her face close to Lawrence and said with a low, puppy-like growl. At this point, he could finally see the scene before him clearly. There was a person beside this endless-seeming stretch of road. He couldn’t see one, but given her eyes there was probably a chicken there as well.

“Surely you do not mean to start a hopeless argument with me, about whether you said so or not?”

Nothing was more terrible than when she smiled and it wasn’t a real smile. He wanted to tell her just how much it cost to buy a chicken, but this would only work when she was willing to listen, and Lawrence didn’t think this was one of those times. He peeked over at her and sighed; if he didn’t say the right words now she might even kill him.

“Alright, sorry. I’ll keep my promise. But-”

“But?”

She shot back almost at the same time as Lawrence’s utterance, staring him down seriously. Lawrence told himself that he needed to choose his words wisely.

“But just one.”

She stared him in the eye. After a moment of suffocating silence, she turned her eyes forward and grinned. This must be how a pheasant felt when it was startled by a hound. As the thought crossed his mind, he pulled his gaze back toward the front just in time to see the person next to the road stand up, having noticed their presence. When they were close enough to see him waving his arms excitedly, a big smile on his face, Lawrence finally spotted the chicken tied up next to his feet.

“Just one.”

He repeated himself to make sure there were no misunderstandings.

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“Would you like some for your trip?”

Pedestrians were rare in this cold rural expanse. The lone peddler waiting here was a lanky young man around Lawrence's age. Despite his lanky frame, the young man appeared strong, possessing a build unique to farmers. When they shook hands, Lawrence was amazed at how thick his skin was.

"Besides chickens, I've got some specially-made beer too, wanna try some?"

His body was far too toned for him to be a traveling merchant. His clothes were ragged and his breath came out as white mist, but it was clear that he didn't feel cold. He smiled happily as he knocked the large barrel of beer next to him, which was as tall as his knees. He knocked it happily, despite the metallic band used to hold the barrel intact looking rusted through, and the barrel as if it could fall apart at any moment. In contrast, the chickens were plump, well-fed, and full of life, forming an interesting-looking combination.

Lawrence stroked his chin as he thought it over. Since Holo wasn't egging him on she was probably thinking it over as well. Why was a young man who wasn't even in traveling attire out here in a place like this?

"May I sample the beer?"

Since keeping silent wasn't going to get them anywhere, Lawrence finally spoke up, to which the man quickly nodded.

"Of course!"

He took out what looked to be a large, round measuring utensil, and opening the barrel, began to scoop beer into it.

"It's recently brewed - just look at all the bubbles!"

Lawrence sipped the beer, and found it to be unexpectedly good. Perhaps the wheat or water used to brew it had been of good quality. Perceiving that Holo wanted to have some as well, Lawrence gave her a sip, and Holo immediately urged with her eyes for more.

"Would you like to buy some?"

Lawrence nodded and peeked over at the chickens. He could tell how hard Holo was trying to keep her tail from wagging. Beer and roasted chicken.. she had to be excited.

"Alright. I'll take this chicken and some beer."

The man seemed so happy to land the deal that he didn't even notice Holo's ears twitch reflexively. But Lawrence wasn't just some random traveler with Holo.

Despite his shortcomings, Lawrence could more or less count as a traveling merchant, and so he

said:

“Actually, maybe I’ll need more chickens.. One might not be enough.”

“Huh?”

The man seemed shocked. As was Holo, who now looked at him with surprise. She had recently become better acquainted with the market values of products, so perhaps she already knew just how expensive a chicken was.

Every time she asked to buy something, Holo would always find a way to make up for what was spent later on. She was exactly such a loyal person.

Therefore, she must have been shocked to hear that Lawrence intended to buy numerous chickens.

“There’s a village nearby, isn’t there? We’ve got some time, so if you’re free could you bring us there to buy some more?”

It was easy tell that the young man wasn’t a traveling merchant with a substantial stock of goods, so he must have come here from a village in order to trade for cash or other necessities. As Lawrence expected, the man first nodded weakly, then again with more force.

“For real!? Of course you’d be welcome!”

His happiness was obvious as he tied the barrel and lifted it up with practiced movements to carry it. He stuffed his belongings into a sack and placed it on the top of the barrel and took hold of the rope tying the chicken, then lifted it all and shouted out eagerly.

“I’ll show you the way!”

And then, he traveled off the beaten path in high spirits. Though he was headed toward the unpaved wilderness, the terrain was not so rough that it could not be traversed by wagon. Having made such a judgment, Lawrence pulled the reins and steered his horse after the man. Just then, Holo took the chance to grab hold of his sleeve and speak.

“Hey, if I angered you then just say so.”

Holo revealed an awkward look as she spoke. She must have felt that Lawrence was teasing her in saying that he was going to buy more chickens. He couldn’t keep himself from laughing at that, but she only returned a glare.

“Sorry. I just had a thought, so I asked him.”

“A thought?”

She seemed suspicious.

“Yeah.. call it my merchant’s sixth sense.”

Holo gazed up at him incredulously, but he brushed it off.



She might have a knack for catching him off-guard with her acting, but he still believed in his eye for trading.

“If this goes smoothly, I’ll buy you plenty of chickens.”

Despite Lawrence’s declaration, Holo’s expression didn’t change.

“I will wait and see, but I will not raise my expectations.”

Though Holo would not get her hopes up, Lawrence could not help looking forward to what was to come. There was a chance to do some business wherever this spirited young man was leading them.

~~~~

They arrived at a small village with forests and mountain springs off in the distance. The arrangement of the houses was disorderly, like that of a haphazardly-built village, and the fields appeared half heartedly-ploughed no matter how one looked at them, giving the village a particularly desolate appearance.

Towns or villages that lacked a unified government were either filled with chaotic bustle or reeking of poverty, and this one obviously belonged to the latter.

“This is really off the beaten path.”

It was no wonder she was being so blunt given the scene that lay before them. Towns existed to connect roads to other towns, and villages existed to connect roads to the manors of nobility. And yet, as if this place wasn't desolate enough, there were no roads in sight. One could safely say this place was completely cut off from the world. It was, to coin the phrase, a veritable island in the wilderness.

“Here we are, welcome to Keisse Village!”

Though it wasn't at all grand, there was a wooden fence to mark that the land beyond belonged to a village. The young man shouted to Holo and Lawrence just as he crossed this fence, and there was indeed "a village" before them.. though that was about all one could say about it.

Having long since noticed their presence, the villagers shamelessly stared at Lawrence and his companions as they came up to them with eyes filled with curiosity.

“Ah~ah, oh boy.. well, come on in! Why don’t you come on over to my place first to get some rest!”

Rather than introducing them to the other villagers, he proudly led them to his home. This time Lawrence laughed along with Holo, because he was probably proud that he’d led outsiders

back. Given his choice of words, Lawrence had deduced this was a village of followers of the Orthodox faith. And his guess was right on, Lawrence thought, smiling inwardly.

The young man opened the door to his home and shot inside. Several confused and muffled questions later, a plump woman shot back out, looking quite flustered. Seeing that the woman and the young man were practically carved from the same mold, Lawrence could not help feeling amused.

“Welcome! You! Hurry up and call the elder!”

Lawrence kept smiling, but not because of their hospitality. A look of sudden enlightenment sprang onto Holo’s face; she probably noticed the real reason for his smile.

“Well, thank you for your passionate welcome, but we’re just regular traveling merchants..”

“Oh, oh.. you’re most welcome! Please come in.. Though I’m afraid we don’t have anything expensive or luxurious to offer..”

Lawrence chuckled in embarrassment and turned to Holo in the seat beside him. She had indeed caught on, and nodded with a smile at the lady. Being spared the trouble of explaining things to Holo was itself a form of profit - now he could handle the rest with his politeness act.

“No, thank you for your hospitality.. We’re sorry to impose.”

“Come on in, please.. Just park your wagon there. You there! Fetch some straw and fill a bucket with water!”

She shouted at a man with a hoe, who was presumably the master of the household. The man seemed confused, but still obeyed her and made himself busy. Lawrence climbed off the wagon, with Holo close behind. As they walked in they noticed the young man from before leading an old man up to the house.

~~~

There were no tiles on the floor, nor was there a wooden or stone foundation - simply leveled soil. A hole in that soil served as a furnace, around which was arranged a table and wooden crates serving as chairs.

Wooden farm equipment was leaning against one wall, and criss-crossing strings of onions and garlic were suspended from the rafters above. And high up on a shelf along one wall there lay a white substance, perhaps yeast.

In spite of its shabby appearance, the interior was wide. It seemed to Lawrence that several families might live there, given the number of chairs, pots and bowls. Lawrence found inns

pleasant, but having grown up in a poor family made him feel very much at ease in this type of environment. Holo, on the other hand, seemed unable to find this comfortable.

“Oh, I see. You two are heading north.”

“Yes. We're going to Lenos.”

“I see.. well, our village is poor as you can see. It's a great pleasure to have traveling merchants visit us.”

True to the old saying that one's title influences one's personality, those who were called "village elders" all tended to dress in a curiously consistent fashion. The short, emaciated old elder of this village now bowed.

“Well, I think it's God's will that brought me here. And to be received with such hospitality. If there is anything I can be of assistance with, please do not hesitate to ask. Though I am but a humble merchant, I'll do everything I can..”

“Our thanks.”

The smile on Lawrence's face wasn't just for the sake of rapport; it was genuine. He honestly felt as if he had been guided by God to visit the village.

“Then, let us thank God for bringing us together..”

After the blessing, Holo and Lawrence clinked their wooden cups together with a nod.

“Ah.. it's such good beer.”

“How shameful.. We should be thanking God with wine, but grapes won't grow on our land..”

“Well, God may determine the quality of wine, but it's people who determine the quality of beer. And your village seems to possess some fine brewing prowess.”

The elder modestly shook his head, but he couldn't cover up how happy he was to hear that. Holo silently watched this little play unfold from her seat next to Lawrence, but he knew she neither viewed it as foolish, nor found the food being served beneath her. After all, he couldn't have missed the questioning glances she cast in his direction from time to time, as if asking “what exactly are you planning?”

“To be honest, this beer was brewed with a secret recipe.”

The elder began talking again, apparently happy their beer had earned some praise. To earn the affections of your elders you had to listen to them for a while, so Lawrence was feigning interest in the man's conversation, until it suddenly became noisy outside.

“And then.. huh?”

The elder twisted his head around, and just then-

“Elder! Dray’s at it again!”

A man whose hands were covered in mud suddenly burst in, shouting and pointing outside in panic.

The elder rose to his feet and apologized to Lawrence.

“I’m so sorry.. something’s come up all of a sudden..”

“No, you’ve welcomed us so kindly, so please take your time and tend to your affairs.”

The elder bowed one more time before making his exit at the other man’s urging. It seemed that the village had a rule where the elder had to receive villagers, so when he left only Holo and Lawrence remained. People were around outside, so someone would come in and help them if they asked, but Holo seemed to be enjoying the moment of silence.

“Hey..”

“Would you like me to explain?”

She stuffed a handful of beans into her mouth before nodding.

"This is a colonial village."

She repeated after him like a parrot.

"Colonial?"

“People colonize an area for a number of different reasons, but simply put they’re people who move out into the wilderness to establish new villages.. though once in a while they end up more like islands in the wilderness, like this.”

Holo rolled her eyes curiously, still drinking her beer.

“Why would they do that?”

She sounded like a little kid.

“You saw those large rocks and logs at the stream as we came into the village, right? Maybe they’re going to build a monastery.”

“Build.. a monastery?”

“Indeed. So-called monasteries are places of worship for the most devout believers. They can only serve their purpose - letting those followers lead chaste, virtuous lives of humble poverty - if they're built in a remote place free of worldly temptations.”

Someone like Holo would see a monastery as a fortress of solitude, built upon a foundation of strict rules. It would probably be tough for her to survive even a single day in such a place.

But those who built such solitary fortresses weren't all robed, honest lambs with bibles in their hands. Most of the villagers here probably had criminal relatives, or had been mixed up with heathens.

Building a remote monastery was an agricultural challenge. Not only did people have to construct the actual building, but they also had to plot out the fields and divert the streams necessary to sustain the monks who would live there. It was hard work, which they did to atone for their sins.

“Well, if that is the case..”

She seemed to have remembered the Churches' nature mid-sentence. Given her intellect, she must have figured out the rest herself.

“Then you are surely scheming to take advantage of this situation.”

He knew she chose those specific words intentionally.

“I just want to help these poor folks.”

“As if. You wish to help them into opening a new business with you.”

His smile was born of the fact that this village was no different from a fish-filled lake no one had discovered yet. This was no longer an era where a village could be completely self-sufficient. Farming tools, equipment, livestock, clothing and looms; as soon as a village was established, so too were supply and demand.

People would be selling plump chickens and refreshing beer in a place like this. For a merchant, that was like finding a lost treasure. They could buy the chicken and beer in exchange for basic necessities, and if they were able to provide everything the village needed they could reel in profits more enticing than the finest beer in the world.

Holo seemed shocked at first, peeking at him as she sipped her beer. Then, with her ears quivering constantly under her hood, she turned to Lawrence and beamed him a satisfied smile.

“Then enjoy helping them.”

“?”

He didn't get the chance to ask her to clarify. There came a knock at the door, and it swung open. The man who had called the elder a few minutes ago was standing outside. From that, Lawrence could guess why he was paying them a visit.

“I'm sorry for the intrusion. If you can read, would you help us?”

He was in a remote village where no merchants would normally visit, being asked if he was literate. It was no wonder why he stood up from his chair-crate, filled with the motivation born of having encountered such luck.

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“Oh, spare me! We already agreed on this last time! Are you trying to go back on your word?! My field's six levins big!”

“Don't lie! Mine's supposed to be six levins, and yours five! So why's my field smaller than yours!? And why'd you put up this fence..”

No one had to explain the situation to Lawrence; he could clearly hear the argument in the distance. He knew what it was immediately. From their talk of “levins,” it was clear where they had immigrated from. It was a nation of forests and lakes named Riveria, where a wise and just King named Levin the Second ruled.

A unit of land was named after him - the length of his arm-span when he raised his arms. But no matter how wise the King, land disputes would always take place. The elder had no idea what to say to settle the dispute.

In newly-founded villages like this, elders didn't have the authority they normally would have. Without that kind of authority - and the ability to think outside the box - he'd never be able to put an end to these disputes.

“Elder, our visitors are here.”

“Oh dear, oh my..”

The hapless elder looked over at Lawrence, and relaxed like he'd just spotted his savior.

“I have a very awkward request.”

“There's a dispute over land distribution?”

Anyone doing business between villages on a long-term basis would run into these situations - they occurred quite frequently, but the elder seemed to have concluded that Lawrence was a man of wisdom, based on the impressed look on his face that screamed “You’re completely right.”

“This land belongs to a noble, who asked us to tend to it. Since then we’ve always had quarrels like this. Sometimes we manage calmly, but there’s some bad blood between those two..”

The two men’s argument had quickly devolved from a relatively logical debate to an exchange of insults. A circle of villagers were watching them from a distance, looking quite annoyed. Only Holo seemed to be amused by the spectacle.

“In that case, there should be a deed or contract of some sort?”

That would probably be why Lawrence was asked if he was literate. The elder nodded and pulled out a piece of parchment.

“This is the one, but no one here can read what’s written on it.”

An illiterate village was like a treasure chest that wasn’t even locked. Merchants knew how to convert an agreement into a written contract, so how long could one remain honest in a place like this where no one was able to read what had been written?

“Please let me take a look.”

Such villages were rare, and it was even rarer for a merchant to be lucky enough to earn the first bucket of gold they had to offer. Lawrence turned to the parchment with a straight face, but his excitement was tough to contain.

“Oh, this is..”

Having finally tried to read the paper, it dawned on him that there was no free lunch to be had here after all. He smiled and internally laughed at himself. When he looked at the expectant expression on the elder’s face, his smile became a bitter one. Of course no one could read it.. it was written in the Church’s holy language.

“There are a few among us who can read, but not this.. we suspect it’s written in a foreign language.”

“No.. it’s written in the language of the Church.. I can only read a few set phrases and numbers..”

Lawrence had seen other instances of the Church writing deeds of land ownership and certificates for special privileges. Holo took a look as well, but it seemed beyond her abilities as

well. She quickly lost interest and turned her attention back to the ongoing quarrel.

“Ah.. I see where the problem is.”

Lawrence read through the terms twice before drawing his conclusion. He asked a question to confirm.

“Those two were craftsmen before, weren’t they?”

Holo snickered mischievously under her hood when the two men finally lost it and their argument became a brawl. But the villagers rushed in to break them up at that point. The elder seemed to be debating whether to rush in as well, but when he heard Lawrence’s question he immediately looked at him in amazement.

“That’s right, but.. but how did you know..”

“Well, the land *is* supposed to be evenly distributed so everyone gets six levins.. that much is right. But see right here..”

Lawrence pointed at a word in the text, and the elder squinted at it. But he didn’t know what it meant to begin with, so that wouldn’t solve much.

“This says ‘sheepfold.’ One of their sheepfolds is six levins, and the others is five.”

The elder vacantly stared at the parchment for some time before it seemed to sink in. He closed his eyes tightly and knocked himself on the head in disbelief before he whispered.

“So that’s what it was..”

“Ahh.. so they *didn’t* know there were sheepfolds.”

It was vital for villagers to know how their land was to be distributed. The terms and conditions of how it would be done here would of course have been explained orally to these illiterate folks. But if they didn’t know the words and units being used, it was all for naught. All they would remember was the numbers, and that would inevitably lead to endless disputes.

“It says here that Mr. Hay Barton donated a little more to the monastery, so he’s the one who was assigned the six levin sheepfold.”

“He’s the one on the left.. damn.. to think that they were fighting over *that*..”

“Just hearing the word sheepfold makes it sound simple, but if you’ve never actually touched on the subject you’d have a tough time understanding the implications.”

True to its name, a sheepfold was the fenced-in area encircling the sheep on a plot of land. But

the main purpose wasn't to raise the sheep themselves, but to keep them from straying so they would fertilize the land around the monastery.

Obviously, a large sheepfold encircled a large number of sheep while a smaller one contained fewer, but sheepfolds weren't measured by the number of sheep they meant to hold, but the amount of land being encircled. Some villagers had sheepfolds large enough to fill their fields with sheep, while others could at most fill half their land.

The village elder thanked Lawrence profusely before running off to settle the dispute. He spread out the parchment and explained the situation to the arguers, who had drawn a crowd of villagers. Lawrence watched the scene unfold, smiling in satisfaction at a job well done. The two men soon settled the problem and roughly - and grudgingly - shook hands.

"What? That was all it took?"

Her tone of regret emphasized just how quickly the dispute had been resolved, as she watched the two shake hands in reconciliation.

"Memories easily fade, but written words do not."

Lawrence's mentor had taught him that. It was the reason traveling merchants couldn't keep up with city merchants. They had to remember each transaction, while city merchants recorded them in ledgers. In a dispute, the written word always won.

"A business can't possibly expand when there are disputes like this breaking out all the time, so contracts are crucial."

She murmured grudgingly, her interests dashed by his words.

"You were planning on breaking your promise to buy me chickens as well."

"So, there you have it."

The elder turned and bowed to Lawrence as he and Holo spoke. Lawrence gently waved back. It actually felt quite good to be able to help someone out, he thought to himself.

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For solving their problem, the villagers happily butchered another chicken and roasted it for them for dinner. Of course it was free, and although there wasn't any other kind of liquor, there was enough beer for them to drink to their hearts content. It stood to reason that Holo should be satisfied, but she actually ate as frugally as a modest nun at the feast, soon leaving the table.

A house was prepared for the two of them, and she had excused herself and was taken there. Perhaps their trip had been too tiring and the meat-based cuisine and alcohol had proven too

much for her stomach. Unable to discount that possibility, Lawrence participated in the banquet a little while longer for the sake of courtesy before heading back to their lodgings as well.

It was their third day traveling in the harsh winter - just the length of time needed to determine whether one could take such a trip. Even someone conditioned for it would exhaust themselves quickly without sufficient caution. Holo had already felt unwell several times during their journey. Even the Wisewolf, an incarnation of the harvest spirit of wheat, wasn't exempt from fatigue.

After being led by the villagers to the home they were staying in, Lawrence opened the door and was greeted by quiet darkness. Taking an oil lamp, Lawrence found that the villagers had lined up some crates to form a bed for them in the center of the room. They themselves usually slept on grass, meaning that Lawrence and Holo were being treated as important guests.

What he wasn't sure about was why they had only prepared a single bed; did the villagers lack the materials for a second bed, or were they just being "considerate?" In any case, Holo had already rolled up into a ball on the bed, and pulled the covers over herself. He spoke to her softly.

"Are you alright?"

If she was asleep, Lawrence had no intention of waking her. If she hadn't recovered after one night, then he could just spend some money and live in this village for a little longer. With that thought, he blew out the candle and hopped onto the grass-covered bed, pulling the thin linen blanket over himself. He was worried that he might rouse her, but he didn't.

Though it was only a bed matted with hay, it was still much more comfortable than sleeping on the box seat of his wagon. That said, the only light in the room was what little moonlight crept in through the small holes used to vent smoke from the furnace, so all he could see as he lay there face-up was the ceiling and a few beams.

He closed his eyes and thought back on the village's situation. It had thirty or forty people. It was surrounded by forests and streams, and had ready access to honey, fruit, and fish. It was also on land suitable for grazing, quite fertile despite an abundance of rocks here and there.

Even if they simply built a monastery here, they could support over a hundred people. If they didn't yet have a merchant looking after them, he could control the trade to and from this place. During their feast, he had chatted with the villagers about trading for ironworks and cattle.

If a noble was willing to allocate a remote piece of land for a monastery, either he or someone he knew was likely near death's doorstep.

That's why the plans for such places were usually rushed, and work began even before all the important details were settled. The master of the project might not even live in the area.

Since the land rights were written on paper, they often ended up circulated like dandelion puffs wafting on the wind. It wasn't at all surprising for an aristocrat to end up donating his land to someone from a distant land he wasn't at all familiar with.

Thus, no matter the era, that patchwork nature of land rights - like a beggar's stitched-together clothing - was always the source of disputes. As a result, those who lived around the disputed land would often avoid contact with their new neighbors, fearing they would be dragged into those disputes.

This village was quite typical of these concerns. According to the villagers, merchants in towns and villages nearby lacked the confidence to deal with them. The elder also mentioned that having the young man sell chickens and beer at the roadside was an attempt to incur the sympathy of passers-by. Surely, heaven had granted Lawrence this opportunity. To the villagers, Lawrence was like an angel sent by God.

Lawrence hadn't had too much to drink, but he couldn't conceal his mirth. He couldn't be blamed for being a bit giddy, because what he dreamed of when he was traveling on his own was now right in front of him. Just how much profit could he make in this village? The night was growing darker and darker, but his mind was growing clearer and clearer. The prospects here were more intoxicating than the beer served to him at the feast. Just as he started to get drunk on his thoughts-

"Seriously, you are such a hopeless male."

Mixed with a sigh, those were the words that reached his ears the moment he noticed Holo slowly stirring.

"Hmm? Oh, you're awake?"

"How could I sleep through such foolish laughter."

Lawrence could not help putting a hand to his face upon hearing that.

"I left the feast in such an atypical manner, but you cared not. You just kept laughing.."

Her saying this confirmed that she'd intentionally left the banquet early. Lawrence chose his next words extra carefully so he wouldn't sound like he was blaming her, and didn't earn her anger.

"Do you have any idea how relieved I am that you still sound as spirited as ever?"

He felt her tail rustling under the blanket they shared. Holo, who could distinguish lies from truth, pulled up to him and bared her fangs.

“Fool.”

He kept quiet, knowing she’d be angry no matter how he responded, but apparently his response was more or less acceptable. She then turned over, with her back facing him. It was such a direct expression of her feelings that he knew she couldn’t really be *that* angry with him.

“Why did you leave so quickly? The chicken and beer were delicious.”

*Especially* the beer, he thought. In fact, he’d asked them about it and learned about the dried spices they had ground into powder and added to the beer to create that unique flavor. The spices were exquisite, and the chickens were so plump they practically oozed with grease. Why was she so unsatisfied?

She didn’t respond at once, but after a while she slowly spoke with a frail voice.

“You enjoyed the beer that much?”

“Uh..?”

He didn’t ask her that because she’d spoken too softly, but rather because her response was the furthest from what he expected to hear.

“I could not stomach it. With that stench, I could not believe you drank it as if it were so delicious.”

People had their preferences, so it wasn’t strange that she disliked the taste of their beer. But he couldn’t understand her anger.. no, her sadness.

He allowed his gaze to linger in the air a moment longer before speaking slowly and carefully, as if fearing that Holo would vanish in a cloud of bubbles.

“They brought those spices with them from their homeland.. they’re an acquired taste, so people either love them or hate them-”

“Fool.”

She kicked him under the blanket and turned back to face him. The features on her scrunched-up face seemed unnatural somehow, but it wasn’t because of the moonlight from the hole in the roof. It was the same expression she always wore when she had something to say, but couldn’t bring herself to say it.

And Lawrence was never able to determine why she couldn’t bring herself to speak in those

situations.

“Forget it!”

With that, she turned away again and curled up into a ball. When they slept on the wagon, her tail was usually his blanket. But this time, she went as far as to snatch away most of the actual blanket they were sharing. Needless to say, she kept her tail to herself.

Given that her ears were pulled down, Lawrence knew she didn't want to listen to him anymore. The form of her back made it clear that she wanted him to figure her feelings out for himself.

“..”

Was she throwing a tantrum because the beer wasn't to her liking? Was she really that difficult a person? Clearly not - the beer topic was just her excuse to get angry.

Just then it dawned on him that since he'd met that young man on the road, he'd been drunk on potential opportunities, obsessed with business. He'd heard that a hunter's hound would become jealous when the hunter married.

Though he found it difficult to believe she'd react in such a way, perhaps this was the “foolish male's state of mind” that she spoke of? He glanced at her back, scratching his head in embarrassment.

Whatever her state of mind was, he had to start paying better attention to her starting the next day, he thought to himself. After all, this wolf's temper was as unpredictable as the weather in a forest deep within the mountains.

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When it drizzled in the winter, a blanket was used for covering goods. But for himself, he would simply hug his body with his arms and spend the whole night that way. He had it quite good right now, sleeping under a roof on a bed of matted hay.

He woke up in the morning with a typical sneeze. Before voicing any complaint, he opted to reflect on past experiences to make it easier to accept his present situation.

Holo slept comfortably beside him, under the sheets, snoring. Though he was hardly the type to never get angry, all he could do when he saw her sleeping face was softly sigh and turn to rise out of bed.

This house was called a home, but it actually looked more like a furnished cave. He exhaled white

mist and stretched, his stiff joints popping and creaking in the cold air outside. The floor wasn't wooden, but a pile of soft earth - that was for the best, since he wouldn't wake her as he walked.

He went outside and stretched mightily under the dawn sky, welcoming what seemed to be the start of another fine day. Villagers were gathered around wells drawing water as oxen, pigs and goats were heard braying in the distance. It was the spitting image of that hardworking village one saw in paintings. Breakfast wasn't something he should be expecting, he realized with a rueful smile.

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Holo finally woke up at noon. Villagers would normally react to that with critical stares, but perhaps because this was a colonial village, they simply smiled at her. Almost all of them had traveled extensively at some point in their lives, bringing their families and livestock with them. They were all well aware that a traveler's biological clock differed from the norm.

But he was right about breakfast. Breakfast was a luxury in even the most materialistic town. Of course it wouldn't even cross the minds of those in a simple, hardworking village that was building a monastery.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

He wondered if Holo slept in knowing that she might as well, since there wasn't going to be any breakfast. She ate a slice of toasted bread with slices of pork sausage on it, the pigs having been slaughtered for the winter.

He would have felt guilty if they were enjoying such a sumptuous meal for free, but fortunately that wasn't something he needed to worry about. Holo was focused on Lawrence's hands as she ate, who in turn was focused on the task at hand.

Watching her devour her bread in such big bites while drinking beer made his stomach grumble in complaint. But it seemed that her anger from the previous day had subsided, so he felt it prudent to not risk triggering another wave. Even knowing he risked spoiling her, he decided to answer her inquiry rather than voicing his dissatisfaction.

“Translating.”

“Trans.. lating?”

He couldn't help but worry that even trying to nag her about talking with her mouth full would only come back to bite him. He nodded in reply as he brushed the crumbs of bread away from around her mouth.

“I was asked to translate this from the Church language to help prevent more disputes like yesterday’s.”

It would be quite expensive for them to get someone in a nearby town to translate it for them. Though he wasn’t charging for the service, he likewise couldn’t guarantee the accuracy of his translation.

“Oh~”

She appeared to be lost in thought, squinting at the piece of parchment on the table and the wooden slate he used for translating. But she soon lost interest and spoke while taking a sip of her beer.

“Well, as long as you are willing to work, I can go on eating and drinking without restraint.”

After tossing out this quip - which would have frozen the smile on anyone’s face - she tossed the last bit of bread into her mouth and left his side.

“I just wish you’d exercise a *bit* of restraint around me, at least.”

He murmured at her back and sighed. But when his eyes fell back down he noticed something.

“Hey! That’s mine..”

Sure enough, she turned around to reveal their second slice of bread in her mouth.

“’Twas but a small joke.. do not react with a such a horrified expression.”

“If it was just a small joke, then why is there so little bread left?”

“I should be allowed to be a little shameless around you, no?”

“Oh, I’m surely honored.”

He threw her attitude back at her, making her even less happy as she sat on the table. Just as he was wondering how spoiled she could possibly get, she flashed him an evil smile.

“Then I shall turn to the villagers: Sir, sir! Please, just a little bread..”

It was obvious who would feel bad if she really did that, but if Lawrence just caved in now he really would be spoiling her too much.

“Just how much *do* you need, anyway? Enough to feed several grown men?”

He shot that out like he was flicking her nose, then snatched his bread out of her hands, took a

bite, and turned back to his translation. She lowered her head and sighed, her interest dashed. Just as he was thinking that *he* should be the one sighing-

“If I was asked by the villagers, I would put a hand on my belly and say..”

Lawrence knew he would lose if he responded, so he picked up his quill and pretended he wasn't listening.

“Aye, I would say.. ‘I would like enough for two.’”

She leaned over and spoke directly into his ear. He coughed the bread he was chewing on right back out, but he certainly wasn't overreacting. The malicious grin remained on her face as she questioned him.

“What? Did you not always know that my appetite is that of two?”

One had to put the weapons they had to good use to win in a bargaining scenario, but it boggled the mind how well Holo wielded hers. Just as Lawrence opted to stop listening to her and began dusting the bread crumbs off the wooden slate, her hand reached in and plucked the sausage link that was sandwiched between his bread.

“Hey, you, that frown on your face is from hunching over this desk all morning. You should go outside and breathe in the cool air.”

When they had only just met, Lawrence would have simply taken her words at their face value and replied, “mind your own business,” inciting her anger. But now he just leaned back in his chair silently and closed his eyes for a moment before raising his hands in surrender.

“It would be troublesome should a grain fall upon a field after the harvest has ended.”

“Aye, I cannot guarantee that I will not fall in love with the wheat here, either.”

It was a joke that only she, who lived in the wheat, could pull off.

Having pulled down her hood and concealed her excited tail, she then took the initiative and approached the door, extending her hand to open it.

“I would indeed be troubled if you were to fall for the wheat here. What a headache it would be to watch you randomly eat wheat off of the ground.”

“Indeed. For someone who values every grain, picking them up is sheer torture.”

Holo's face swelled up in anger; she bit off a piece of the bread Lawrence was holding.

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Taking a leisurely tour of the village was quite a pleasant way to pass the time. Moreover, Holo hadn't seen a regular village in all the time since they had left Pasloe.

She may not have been happy at the time she decided to leave Pasloe, but being in a farming village was sure to trigger some nostalgia. She looked at the bundles of grass set aside for fertilizer and the various bits of muddied farm equipment up against the wall (common sights in Pasloe), and smiled.

“They don't talk much with their neighbors, so that's why they're planting beans this time of year.”

Villages would normally stop farming this time of year, and simply weave baskets or make wooden furniture to sell. In other words, they would normally shift their routines to working indoors. But here, things were different. They were three days from the nearest town, even by wagon. Towns generally refused to do business with such distant neighbors to avoid the potential pitfalls. And so, it was far more pressing for the villagers to focus on their food supply. Other things could wait.

“After all, beans will help fertilize such barren soil. And yet they should be able to sow a variety of crops without worrying about such details.”

It was a small village; they were soon at its outskirts. From this vantage point, the fields weren't so expansive that they couldn't see the far end, but it was still impressive to consider that so few people were managing this much land.

The fields weren't separated by fences or ditches, so they were probably common to all of the villagers. Most places this remote didn't even bother bordering their land with fences or ditches.

That said, several people could be seen working, all facing toward the springs. They seemed to be digging drains for irrigation.

It was often said that lies were told for convenience, and it seemed that Holo had indeed been right: Lawrence hadn't frowned once since they left the house.

“Hey, how much money do you feel you will be able to squeeze from this village?”

The rickety-looking fence that encircle the village seemed sturdier than he'd expected. After watching Holo sit upon it, he sat down next to her and waved at the villagers that had spotted them before turning to make his reply.

“Aren't you being a bit too nasty to speak so ill of me?”

“Was your expression yesterday not nastier still?”

Was she upset last night because he was revealing such a greedy look? No, he quickly dismissed that notion. Given how happy Holo seemed right now, it was probably something else.

“There is profit to be had anywhere goods are being exchanged. If they drop something, I’ll just lick it off the ground.”

“Wow, just like wine..”

She was probably talking about the drops of alcohol that fell from the pouches of fermenting grapes that people hung under their eaves. The grapes were pressed by their own weight, and only the juice that dripped out was used to make wine. The result was a flavor that ordinary wine couldn’t match. Her wolf side was always the same; when it came to food, her knowledge was second to none.

“We should be able to earn a profit without even relying on your abilities this time. The profit potential here is rather large for such a random mid-journey encounter.. perhaps enough even to let you stuff yourself with chicken.”

A breeze blew by gently, carrying with it the mooing of distant cows. *How serene*, he thought, just before the sharp clucking of chickens rang out from behind them.

“How should I say this.. when I stop to think about it, I’ve been relying on your power alone, so shouldn’t I at least be gracious and profit by my own power once in a while?”

It wasn’t as though he’d sealed any deal yet, so it was probably far too early to talk like this. But Lawrence still felt that she wouldn’t blame him for talking a little tough.

That, and if he stopped to consider his gains and losses one by one, he was certain that what Holo had earned for him far exceeded what it cost to quench her hunger and thirst. That was why he sometimes wanted to let her eat and drink to her heart’s content.

“Hey, you.”

“Hmm?”

“Do you sincerely believe that I could eat, drink and be merry like that with nary a whit of worry?”

Just then, he wondered if time had stopped while the answer dawned on him.

“Then.. *that’s* why you were so angry last night?”

She might always be pestering him for things, but she always made up for it. She managed to

earn what she spent, and always helped Lawrence inwardly and outwardly to solve the problems they faced on their travels.

And wasn't it precisely because she hated being treated as a special entity that made her fear being worshiped as a goddess? From that perspective, all of his "consideration" was probably having an adverse effect.

"Wellll.. I think there may not be a need for you to be that concerned, even if loyalty and compassion are so deeply ingrained in your nature."

That only made her glare at him in disgust, as if to say "can you not understand without me spelling it out for you?"

"Hmph. I am just an ignorant wolf. I cannot even read those.. words."

Ah, so he *was* right.. she was just anxious about not having made a contribution. Seeing him working at the desk after waking up would have been like a slap in the face to her.

"Well, if that's all it is, there *is* something you can help with."

Her face relaxed as she looked at him expectantly. He smiled and continued.

"Why don't you just teach them how to farm wheat?"

His joke seemed to hit her so hard she didn't even know whether to get angry. Her face first filled with mixed emotions, then her cheeks puffed out and she turned away.

"But really, even just a tiny bit of wisdom would make these people very appreciative. After all, some of them are farmers without even knowing what a sheepfold is. I'm sure you have something sagely to offer them, yes?"

He added one final line.

"And the happier they are, the more profit I can earn."

She turned to him with a look in her eyes as if she was about to burst into tears. Clearly she wanted to say, "you are being too cunning."

"Um.. uh.."

"Come now, you're overthinking things. Surely you have something to offer?"

He smiled as he spoke, and her eyes finally closed to think. She frowned, her ears moving around under her hood. *She has one heck of a loyalty streak*, he thought. She was far too rational for her own good. Turning away - still smiling - he looked up leisurely at the birds high

up in the sky. Just then-

“Mr. Lawrence.”

He heard someone calling to him from the distance, and turned back to the village.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

He turned around to see the village elder calling to him from behind them.

“Ah, sorry, my translation isn’t quite..”

“No, no! That's not why I'm here. I hate to bother you with something else, having already for your help in translating, but there is something I would like to bounce off you..”

“Bounce off me?”

Lawrence did his best to hide his excitement, knowing it was probably another issue of resource-distribution troubling the village. He stole a sideways glance at Holo, who seemed like she could care less.

“Well, if there's anything I can do to help, please name it.”

Holo's devil-may-care attitude made a smile creep onto his face, and seeing that warm smile and hearing his offer made the elder relax somewhat.

“I truly thank you. Actually, we’ve been having more and more problems like this recently, so I was hoping to borrow your wisdom..”

“My wisdom?”

The elder put on a look of defeat as Lawrence smiled, then started explaining the problem.

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Lawrence hung his head in frustration, seeing how much of the wooden slate remained to be translated compared to the amount he’d written on the parchment. The problem the elder described existed in every village.

Villages normally had ways to solve such problems, perhaps by using the authority of the Church, a village elder, or a certificate issued by a neighboring lord. Some even had legal systems that were inviolable. But a village like this one had no such means.

They often crumbled quickly, lacking a strong unifying force. That's the crisis they were facing here, and as Lawrence had guessed it was to do with land distribution issues the elder had just

asked him about.

It seemed the feudal lord had originally defined a random area to serve as the village's perimeter, and left it up to them to divide the land amongst themselves according to the sizes they had been individually allotted.

And therein lay the rub: they were only told how much each person should have, but not precisely how to carve up the total land to make sure everyone got their fair share.

“So, up until now they just casually chose bits of land, and it was not until the first dispute happened that they realized such a haphazard arrangement would cause problems.”

“Yes, at first, with so much unassigned land there wouldn't be any problems. But if they just divided up the land without careful planning.. well, I could draw a simple diagram and they would understand. At some point they'd be left with a bunch of scattered slivers of land no one would want.”

“Rather than drawing them a diagram, I would rather you show them by breaking up a loaf of thin bread.”

Holo spoke happily as she sat on the table.

“You mean oat bread? But oat bread is tough.. I'm sure you don't find it all that tasty, huh?”

“Well, the taste might not be grand, but it has an addictive texture to it. These fangs of mine sometimes itch with an unbearable longing..”

Seeing her reveal a toothy grin made him feel unconsciously nervous.

“But then again, I feel your teeth are more fearful compared to mine.”

“Huh?”

Lawrence stupidly asked without thinking. She placed a hand on her chest and replied.

“After all I might be bitten and be afflicted by your poison.”

He didn't reply, other than to lower his head back between his hands in contemplation. After the chicken running around outside clucked a third time, Holo gave him a kick and spoke with a sour expression.

“Is that business more important than talking to me?”

“Of course.”

“What!”

He’d just instinctively replied without thinking, but when he saw how wide her eyes had opened and how tense her ears were he realized how badly he’d misspoken.

“W-well.. all I mean is that if I don't honor the elder's request, I can't earn their favor. It's true, isn't it, that our chance to make money here will only last so long, while we have plenty of time to talk later?”

“Then just pray that my good intentions shan't be something so ephemeral!”

She spun away, having shouted at him.

Lawrence was confident he could remain in good favor with those he'd only met briefly, but such thin tactics meant nothing in the face of Holo.

Even so, this chance in the village was quite a rare and precious one, judging from how willing the elder was to confide in him on topics that were so important. If he didn't meet their expectations they'd likely view him in disappointment and he'd squander that chance.

Love couldn't be bought, it was true, but favors could be converted into wealth.

“..”

He was at a loss for words, but it was only because his mind was busy turning in an effort to consider the matter at hand. Still, he was just sitting there unable to do anything. He’d never encountered this kind of problem when he traveled on his own, and had been taught nothing to help him cope with it.

In the end, though, he was aware of what was most important to him if he had to wait for the scales of his mind to balance things out. And yet, just as he opened his mouth, having chosen what to say-

“You truly are stupid. I can only question your learning ability.”

Being seated on his table meant that, naturally, she was higher up than he was. No one would be happy with such arrogance right now, but her red-tinged amber eyes made it clear that she wasn’t going to accept any kind of resistance. He didn’t know this from reason, but simply from having experienced traveling with her for so long.

“What did I just tell you? What did I say, in spite of how embarrassing it was? Here I am right beside you, and yet you cast me aside to mull things over on your own..”

“Ah..”

That's right, she did just complain about that. She was feeling left out, and yet here he was repeating the same mistake as she stared at him. Rather than apologizing, he had to ask the question.

"Then.. will you I-lend me.. your wisdom?"

After he'd stuttered out his line, she squinted, continuing to stare at him with a solemn look on her face. Her tail wagged softly to and fro, like a scale balancing out whether to accept or reject him. But ultimately, it stopped with her sigh.

"Perhaps I am the most foolish one here."

He didn't even have time to consider what she meant before she suddenly continued. He could only straighten his back and offer his undivided attention.

"Tsk. I mean, I only know about the methods that the people in Pasloe always used that angered me."

"..Well, rocks and wood can be moved, so they're not suitable to mark boundaries.. it's almost impossible to define boundaries in the first place, and if anyone tried to do so with words, it would only lead to disputes."

Unless a god were to intervene, a perfect solution didn't exist. More pressing was their need to formulate a solution that all the villagers would accept for its accuracy and fairness.

They had gone so far as to request Lawrence's help, and if he simply handed them the most obvious solution it would only disappoint them. Holo wasn't planning on revealing her true form, was she? Just as that thought surfaced, she gently poked him and spoke.

"Fool. Have you forgotten what it was that drove me to tears in Pasloe?"

Then, if she wasn't thinking of feigning divine intervention, all that could be done was to gather the villagers and make them decide on boundaries once and for all and imprint them in their memories.

"But how the heck do we accomplish that? Only someone who can trace the stars can measure things that accurately. I suppose we could also judge it based on certain landmarks, like a sailor might, but it would be impossible to permanently record that in words.. a map based on that would just be too vague.."

Maps only used by travelers could be simple and not cause major problems. However, what the village needed was a map that could serve as the basis for their land distribution issues.

"Yesterday, you mentioned that people's memories are unreliable, did you not?"

“Huh? Yeah, that’s right. That’s why we have to write things down.”

“Very well, and people believe that what is written will not change. I understand that, but do humans truly have such unreliable memories.”

He didn’t know what she meant, so he replied the only way he could.

“Well, when people are up against one another, memories are hardly objective enough to base decisions on. That, and such things need to be remembered for years.. decades, even.”

She listened to him intently before replying.

“Well, you are right.”

After expressing her acknowledgment, she continued.

“Then.. how about something like this?”

She happily hopped in beside his ear and spoke into it quietly. Upon hearing her, he stared at her in surprise. The Wisewolf shook her head happily.

“As you say, jotting down a landmark will not suffice. But should we consider the combination of multiple landmarks, we can be far more accurate. This was how I navigated the mountains. There was a ridge in every direction I could use to judge my location..”

The villagers shouldn’t have any problem understanding that, but disputes arose wherever written records were not made. And people were extra anxious when it came to boundaries.

“And, there truly are memories in this world that everyone can accept and agree upon.”

Her idea definitely should work for everyone. At least it was better than anything he'd come up with. And so, he rose from his chair, and took her hand in his.

~~~

No matter the era, maintaining records was always challenging. Even Holo's hometown of Yoitsu could only preserve records successfully by carving them carefully into stone walls or keeping them in dimly-lit basements. And only a couple of people knew how to maintain them, and only the gods knew if they had survived over all those centuries.

It was clear how unreliable verbal records were, given the sheer number of disputes that existed where parties clung to their own stories and stubbornly refused to come to a consensus. They would always have to struggle, racking their brains hard to come up with a means for such decades-long disputes to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

One way to resolve this was overheard by Holo when she dwelled in fields of wheat.

“Mr. Lawrence. We’re all here.”

“Excellent. Then, who will be the representative?”

“By the grace of God there just happens to be a suitable candidate right here in the village.”

When the elder had heard the plan from Lawrence, he reacted much the same way Lawrence had when he heard the plan from Holo: is that really a good idea? But he also soon realized that it might just be feasible.

It required no special skills, tools, or expenses, and yet it was something anyone could accept and clearly recall, even decades later. The elder immediately called everyone around the well, which would be the cornerstone of their record.

What remained was deciding who would be the instigator. After careful deliberation, Holo was chosen. Not simply because she was a neutral party, but also because she felt like the best person for the job.

The villagers were only told they were being gathered to settle their boundary disputes. They were all regarding the situation with suspicion, so it was no surprise that they would be wearing such expressions. After all, they had been searching for a universally-acceptable method for a while now, but to no avail.

The elder placed his hand on Holo's shoulder and coughed.

“I pledge to the Almighty God, in the name of myself and the village, to settle the issues of land distribution that plague us all by placing a permanent record here.”

He had allegedly once been a cow-herder in a vast field, so while his voice was somewhat hoarse it still rang out loudly and clearly.

“You have all been gathered here to bear witness to the establishment of the village’s boundary markers, and to ensure that today’s events shall be remembered if a dispute should arise again decades in the future.”

Disregarding Lawrence's own appearance, Holo had lowered her head to appear as pitiable as possible to evoke sympathy. Given her restraint at the previous night's banquet, everyone seemed to be under the assumption that she genuinely was a nun. She seemed a natural fit for this role.

Once more the elder coughed, and continued.

“Our two wise guests have revealed to us this ritual, with a long history of use in such land-

distribution disputes. As the elder of this village, I have suggested our candidate representative.”

He then pushed a boy forward, who appeared to be no older than five. His large, round eyes and lovely golden hair called to mind the image of an angel, but he had no idea what was being asked of him, or what would be done to him. All he knew was that he had been suddenly surrounded by adults with serious looks on their faces. He was obviously tense and nervous, but the elder continued regardless.

“Any objections?”

Several villagers looked at each other, yet didn’t object. Their reaction was predictable for those who had never witnessed this kind of ceremony. Lawrence had, however, assured the elder that even if they still had reservations after the ritual was performed, they could still be convinced.

“Then let us begin.”

Not a peep was heard from the crowd. The elder quietly spoke into the boy's ear, then pushed him closer to Lawrence and Holo. He staggered a few steps, turned back to the elder for a moment, and then timidly faced the travelers at the elder's urging. Even adults feared travelers in a village like this, so as he slowly approached them his eyes wandered restlessly back to the crowd; undoubtedly looking at his mother, Lawrence thought.

“We're all counting on you.”

Lawrence spoke with a smile as the boy approached, and held out his hand. The boy took that hand nervously and gave a vague reply, whereupon Lawrence pointed at Holo beside them. She wasn’t tall, and yet the boy was shorter still.

From that distance he could clearly see her face, in spite of the hood over her lowered head. But when he straightened his back in surprise, and smiled shyly, Lawrence knew that Holo had flashed him a smile. Given how kindly he returned that smile as he took her hand, it seemed likely that there were no young girls in this village.

“I am named Holo, what about you?”

“Um.. Co-Corolli.”

“Hmm.. Corolli.. a fine name.”

He shrank back in embarrassment from her praise and stroking his head, but he looked very happy. Based on his appearance he might have even forgotten that a ceremony was about to take place.

“Well then, Corolli. We will be playing a little game next. Hmm, worry not, it shan’t be hard at all.”

His face stiffened, having remembered why he was there in the first place. And yet, all it took was a hug for a brave look to gradually surface on his face. It seemed that all men were the same, no matter their age.

“First, we shall pray to the north.”

“Pray?”

“Indeed, whichever prayer you like. You pray every day, yes?”

Holo was, of course, somewhat aware of the Church’s rituals. The boy nodded and brought his hands together, albeit a bit clumsily.

“The north has its own angels and spirits, as does the south. If you simply say a prayer like, ‘I wish for delicious food,’ it just might come true.”

She flashed him a wily smile, and he returned it. At her urging he began praying to the north.

“When angels and spirits decide to listen to one’s wishes, they will show signs. You must remember well the locations and shapes of the rivers and hills. Do not miss the signs.”



He nodded as she spoke, then opened his eyes wide and worked hard to engrave the scenery before him into his mind, swallowing nervously as he prayed.

North, East, South, West.

By the time he finished praying in each of the four directions, he had surely thought of every delicious dish he knew.

“Ah, well done.. and now, Corolli..”

This was the crucial point. The boy looked up at her like a loyal dog.

“Angels and spirits love smiles, so give them a big wide one.”

The boy obediently opened his mouth into a wide, teeth-revealing grin, the brightest expression he could manage. At that very instant, something shot through the air with a swish, and a split-second later a loud crack was heard.

“Wha!”

All the villagers watching from the sidelines gasped in unison at the scene that just unfolded. They stared in shock at what they had just witnessed. Holo waved her hand a bit with a wry smile; she had obviously used all of her strength, not holding back in the slightest.

The reason she had asked him to smile wide enough to open his mouth was so he wouldn't bite his tongue. Being on the receiving end of such a sudden and powerful slap, the boy didn't wipe the blood from his nose or even straighten his back. He simply stared wide-eyed at Holo, who had until then seemed like such a gentle angel.

“People’s memories fade, but everyone has a moment in his life that he will *never* forget. Now this brave young boy Corolli shan’t forget this landscape for decades to come.”

She smiled as she made her proclamation, at which point a commotion stirred through the crowd. It was their first reaction, having just recovered from the shocking incident. Chaos quickly descended upon them, but it was quickly replaced with a tremendous wave of laughter.

They were all surely immigrants, having left their homes to come to this place. Those preparing to embark on such a journey would stand at the edge of their hometown, hearts filled with anxiety and anticipation, staring at the place they called home.

They would engrave the sights in each cardinal direction deep into their memories before they left, such that they could answer with certainty where they were that day, precisely the spot they had stood as they looked back at their old homes.

“Anyone who wishes to object to the conducted ceremony, raise your hand up high!”

The village elder cried out, and the villagers grew quiet. Finally, they shouted back.

“No objections!”

One after another, the villagers expressed their appreciation of the Lord and of Holo’s wisdom. Some even began to dance. The only people to walk up to the boy were Holo, the elder, and (naturally) his mother. After his mother had taken his hand and lifted him up, he finally seemed to realize what had happened and burst into tears in her bosom.

“In my old village, we didn't slap, but rather cast stones.”

She was the only person who knew what was going to happen ahead of time. Despite laughing uncertainly when it was proposed to her, she felt such pride over having her son being chosen for such a vital village record that it was obviously written on her face. She invoked God's name in thanks to Holo and Lawrence.

“Well, that takes care of that problem.”

Holo proudly puffed out her chest as she spoke.

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All villages remembered such days as ones where something special happened. They would commemorate them with feasts, and Keisse was no different. They were going to have a special celebration that night.

The elder shook their hands so much that Lawrence's hands were beginning to swell. He even offered to inscribe their names into the village's history - as ones who had played a critical role in its development - to be honored and discussed for ages to come. As it stood, Lawrence would have no problem building a solid long-term relation with them.

As the sun set, Lawrence watched the villagers decorate the banquet hall with a look of happiness on his face. Having finished his translation, he stretched out in his chair and turned back to see Holo sprawled out on the bed, tending to her tail.

“You are done?”

“Yes. Finally.”

“Then we can finally drink without worry.”

“If only I had it that easy.. there are still negotiations that need to be happen after we eat. Of course..”

He brought his hand to his chest, pausing briefly and speaking in a wooing tone to enhance the dramatic effect.

“This is all thanks to my wise traveling companion.”

Holo played along with his intentionally emphasized words. But her response was a bit more heartfelt, given that she truly had been a great help to him. Right now, he wouldn't just buy her chickens, but enough beer to fill a wagon.

“Once again, I owe you more than you owe me. How would you like me to return the favor?”

He spoke in a carefree tone because he was looking forward to the business talk he was going to have tomorrow, as well as the bright future and limitless potential of this village. It might even grow into a town once the monastery was built.

“Oh.. it can be anything?”

“I wouldn't dare say *anything*. That's beyond my means, but how about a hundred silver coins? That should be enough even for another fancy set of clothes like the ones you're wearing now.”

She looked over her clothes several times, then closed her eyes. What was it she saw behind those eyelids? Apples? Honey-pickled peaches? When her tail began wagging, it became clear she's made up her mind. But she seemed hesitant, meaning it was expensive.

“If it is too difficult, I shall relent, but..”

“How uncharacteristically humble.”

She smiled at his joke and pointed at him.

“That work you were just doing.”

“Work? You mean this?”

“Indeed, that writing. You said it would be expensive to have someone in a city do it?”

Literacy alone was considered a professional skill, so requesting one's assistance to write a letter was expensive in and of itself. But the fees for drafting an official document were greater still.

“What? Would you like me to write something for you?”

“Hmm? Well.. I guess you could say that.”

“If that's all, it's quite a small matter.. didn't you want anything else? Maybe apples or honey-

pickled peaches?”

How rare for her to prioritize something above food. Did she hope to record her memories of her home, after all this talk of records?

“Those *are* alluring.. but food does not last. Yet you said that written words do not change, and can be kept intact for a long time.”

Her look of embarrassment as she spoke made it clear that he had guessed correctly, so he nodded.

“I suppose it will be a pain if you ask me to write a thick volume.”

“No.. nothing too long..”

She hopped off the bed and softly sat herself on the table. Did she want him to write it now, since it wasn't that long?

“Then what is it you'd like me to write?”

She stared off into the distance for a while instead of replying, as if pondering over every word she wanted him to write. It must be something quite dear to her, he thought, so he patiently waited for her to speak. He eventually heard what sounded like a soft breeze blow by, and realized that it was her inhaling as if her contemplation was over.

“The title is.. ‘The Wisewolf Holo’s..”

Lawrence quickly grabbed his quill and laid out a fresh piece of parchment. Holo didn't stop to wait.

“Contract of being led back to her home.”

Lawrence froze, then turned to face her.

“Human memories are unreliable, after all. T'would be a problem should you forget.”

Her smile was serious, as if to blame him. He couldn't reply; he was too busy remembering how upset she was the other day. She lied and said it was because she wanted to feel useful, but this was the truth. Their contract was merely verbal. And he had let it slip just how frail people's memories were while they were in this village.

“Uh.. but that's..”

He finally managed to squeeze out some words, but they hardly formed a coherent sentence. He had no way to put it into words, but the more he thought about his recent priorities, the

more obvious it should be that he prioritized her above all other business. Surely she realized that, which is why he was so slow to accept that she might be upset solely over this.

“But what?”

She shot back coldly. Logic was on her side, and it was obvious that he'd been inconsiderate as well.

“Nothing,”

As he prepared himself to apologize-

“Heh. After all, you have frightened me so many times that the memory of our contract is deeply engraved into my mind.”

She laughed as she spoke.

“And aye.. you seem repentant, so I shall forgive you this time.”

He knew he could still refute her if he wanted (and so did she) so he opted to give her what she wanted.

“I'm sorry..”

“Mhm.”

Her ears rolled around in satisfaction.

“However..”

Her face suddenly grew serious as she looked back down upon him. What now? Lawrence wondered as he sat up straight. She pressed her face against his and spoke.

“If that particular contract is unnecessary, I can still ask for a similar reward, can I not?”

He leaned away while nodding. It was only natural that he had to reward her somehow.. but it suddenly dawned on him what she'd just made him agree to.

“Did you just-”

“The cost to have such a contract written.. I wonder how much it comes out to in food? Will I even be able to eat all of it?”

She grinned intently, and nearly swept everything off the table with her tail. He never knew just how long she'd wait for him to fall into one of her traps, and he'd just buried himself by

promising her.. there was no way for him to refuse her now.

“Hey, the look on your face is just like young Corolli’s was.”

She poked his nose as she teased, but he no longer had the strength to brush her hand aside. She hopped off the table and turned back, pressing herself up against the back of his chair.

“Oh, are you going to cry as well?”

He could only smile, so he rose from his chair and answered.

“I might as well, since I’m also fortunate enough to have someone here who will hug me.”

As she beamed him a smile, he steeled himself and continued.

“But, can that small chest even support-”

*Smack!* She laughed as she waved her hand. He grabbed that outstretched hand, and straightened his shivering body. Her smile was obviously fake, but he knew the spell to turn it into a real one. Of course, that only made it clear that she wanted him to cast that spell, so left with no choice he began his chant.

“Now I’ll never be able to forget your smile.”

Her tail swelled as she tightened her grip on his hand.

She'd left only her name in that village she'd lived in for centuries, and had gradually been forgotten. Words alone would be insufficient to record the memory of her smile. And here and now, the villagers outside were preparing a feast for them. It seemed like the kind of night where getting drunk would come naturally.

Holo nodded softly, and a shy look revealed itself on her face.



## Wolf and the Bright Green Detour

Sometimes, even in the harshest winter, a day with weather so bright and clear would arrive and make one wonder whether spring had arrived early. On such days, when was no breeze blowing, one even felt warm if they sat still under the sun.

Even merchants, who valued time as money, would take the time to enjoy a day like this. They'd halt their wagons at the first meadow that wasn't being grazed upon by cattle, take a bottle in one hand and rye bread in the other, and sip the wine while staring up at the sky and nibbling on the bread. They would gnaw at the bread until it grew tiresome, then stuff the rest of it into their mouths and nearly doze off while chewing it.

The blanket that covered them, having soaked up the warm sunlight, made it feel as though they were sleeping beside a fireplace. The only noise that reached their ears was the soft chirping of birds and the illusory sound of the sun's rays gently warming the ground. Moments like this were a luxury unique to those who traveled.. a luxury that gave one mischievous ideas.

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This particular tale began with a map in the late morning, when the sun hung high overhead and one was no longer disposed to yawning. He rose with the sun, so Lawrence (who traveled by horse-drawn wagon) had debated whether to spice up this dull trip and so pulled out a map.

It was one he'd purchased a few years ago along with a suspicious-looking treasure map; for a cheap price of course. Though the treasure map was scribbled on cheap paper, and seemed dangerously close to falling to pieces along with its secrets, the map it came with was more practical and set down on more durable parchment.

With that map in hand, he directed his gaze to the east. The road they were on ran parallel to a forest for quite a great distance. Though the road itself was barren, the trees and brush in those woods were green all year.

Even so, he'd heard that the forest was now only half the size it once was; much of it had been cleared to build new cities. The map even recorded those old boundaries, showing off just how expansive the forest once was.

“What are you looking for?”

He was studying the map in the driver's seat, when his companion Holo - who was casually lying in the back deck of the wagon - finally noticed it and spoke up. He turned back to see her nun-like form staring at him, leaning on the goods in the wagon with her head lazily tilted in his direction.

“It seems there’s a sawmill around here somewhere.”

“A sawmill?”

“Yeah, though it’s no longer used. It’s a place where lumber is cut and stored for future use.”

Naturally, his interest wasn’t in the former splendor of the forest. He was eyeing the path heading into it because there was a grassy meadow on the other side, and that’s where his interest lay.

“Oh.. so the sawmill is directly ahead on that path?”

Lawrence turned back to his map as he continued his explanation.

“This side of the forest is a busy trading route connecting the towns and villages around here. So many cattle are herded through here that it’s practically barren dirt now. But on the other side of the forest is a lush meadow.”

“A lush meadow?”

Holo didn’t even bother sitting up to ask.

“So lush that grass grows on its verdant slopes even during this time of year.”

Holo made no reply for quite some time. It made him a bit concerned, in fact, so he turned to her only to see her staring back at him in displeasure.

“I am no goat. Seeing a meadow will not raise my spirits or affect my emotions in the slightest.”

She spoke as if disinterested, so if anyone was passing by them and overheard, they wouldn’t have caught her hidden meaning. Still, she wasn’t just beating around the bush.

The lovely pair of wolf’s ears upon her did not belong to a human, nor did the fluffy tail growing from her waist. She might appear to be a maiden of fifteen years or so, but in reality she was a tremendous wolf capable of swallowing a man whole. All who puzzled over her words would understand her meaning the moment they glimpsed her true form.

“All apologies.. but you know, it’d be a huge shame if the meadow was just for grazing.”

“Huh?”

“On a day like today, a gently sloping meadow being warmed by the sun sounds rather idyllic, doesn’t it?”

She directed her gaze at some unknown object; her tail began wagging in her hands a moment

later. Given her imagination, she surely knew what other purpose a meadow might have. And so, by the time her mouth opened to ask her next question she was already far beyond that point.

“But.. are you not in a hurry?”

A leisurely nap in a meadow after a stroll through the forest might seem like something merchants - who equated time with money - would rather strangle themselves before doing. Holo was asking out of a sincere concern for his schedule, but the charming softness of her eyes would have given those beauties who captured the hearts of emperors a run for their money.

Seeing her behave in such a coquettish manner actually made him feel refreshed. Her tail revealed her true feelings far more accurately than any words that came out of her mouth, and as far as Lawrence was concerned, if she would feel that much joy from such a slight delay, there was nothing for it.

In fact, if a casual round of sunbathing would cheer her up this much then it was well worth the delay. Their trip had after all been quite tedious so far, and there wasn't much they could do to break the monotony. A relaxing break was exactly what was called for.

“Hmm, well, even if a rest will make the rest out trip more enjoyable, I feel rather guilty for bringing it up and getting your hopes up..”

“What do you mean?”

He waved the map a little and continued.

“Unfortunately, I don't know how reliable this map is. If it's too difficult going through the forest, we'll have to give up.”

If she were only as old as she looked, Lawrence might have found it difficult to say that. But thankfully, he was talking to the Wisewolf. She fully grasped everything he had to consider before making such a proposal.

She turned over from the lying position she had assumed to groom her tail, lifted her gaze up to meet his from a prone position, and spoke.

“That is little cause for concern. If that is the case, we can simply lie down under a tree where the sunlight is creeping in through the branches and foliage.”

The tables had now turned, and he was imagining her words as she had imagined the fields he described. Sleeping together under elegant trees in a thick forest that kept its leaves year-round, with the only sound being leaves rustling in the breeze, and having rays of sunlight peek through the branches - that sounded just as nice. When he finally snapped himself back to

reality, she was eyeing him for his approval.

“That does sound nice.”

“Then it is decided.”

He set down the map and took the reins, while Holo lay down to face the sky. Their wagon then slowly crept into the forest. It was a bright and clear day, and the morning was no longer dreary.

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The path they took into the forest still seemed to be used. Perhaps hunters, fruit-pickers, beekeepers, or woodsmen still took this route, judging from how well-kept it was. Even their wagon had no trouble getting through the brush.

The forest was neither too quiet nor too loud.. It was just right for this kind of leisurely detour. It seemed Holo could no longer hold herself back from drinking for Lawrence's sake; she began sipping on wine, the sweet songs of their birds her only side dish.

But Lawrence had no complaints, having adjusted his mindset for this casual detour. He did turn around once in a while to make sure she didn't drink every last drop of wine on her own, but each time she just bribed him off with some more wine, which he accepted.

If the map was accurate then the forest was a long, thin strip with the road cutting a horizontal path through it. In fact the road crossed the narrowest section of the forest, making it the shortest and most convenient route across.

But such roads commonly differed from the routes set down on maps, so it came as no surprise when this one sharply veered to the right after quite a while heading straight ahead like the map foretold. It didn't seem like an attempt to bypass an obstacle, but just the natural course of the road.

However, in spite of this deviation from the map's route, the road didn't branch so Lawrence drove on without fear.

“..Speaking of forests in the winter..”

Holo broke their silence.

“T'would have been better for us to come early in the morning.”

Indeed, they didn't have a very clear view of the path. But if they stopped then their wheels might settle into the mud or get stuck between roots, so Lawrence had no desire to turn around just for that. But judging from her tone, Holo was already quite drunk.

“Why's that?”

“Well, what few leaves this forest does shed will still accumulate on the ground, yes? Unable to bear the cold moisture of the night, those leaves will grow damp with dew, which will then evaporate into a white mist when the sun shines down upon them. If we were to breathe in deeply at that point..”

“..It would be wonderfully refreshing for our lungs to take in that moist air, after having grown accustomed to the dry air of winter.”

Holo nodded in satisfaction of how he ended her sentence.

“If there were an ideal season to visit a forest in the afternoon, 'twould have to be summer. On a summer's day the beams of sunlight shoot through gaps in the branches and tickle one's cheeks like feathers.”

“There're too many bugs in the summer, though.”

Being a traveling merchant meant that he knew all of the positives and negatives of forests in the different seasons. As expected, Holo laughed awkwardly. Lawrence could picture her flinging off bugs in annoyance under those same sun-soaked trees on a fine summer's day.

“But forests are lovely places, as opposed to the plains we have been.. uuaaaahhh.. traveling about often of late.”

It sounded like it was time for her to take a nap. After that half-yawned statement, he heard shuffling. She was probably setting out a blanket or some-such. Given their distance from the meadows, she seemed content to return to sleep. Such boldness from his traveling companion made Lawrence speak up in protest.

“It's not just forests.. there's fun to be had on plains and such if you know how to go about it.”

“Hmm?”

“..such as chatting with your companion.”

In good weather it would be even more of a test of one's patience to travel on such monotonous plains. But even compared to that monotony, it was worse to have to keep his grip on the reins while Holo napped leisurely behind him in the wagon, hence his intentional remark.

She was of course clever enough to know what he was playing at, and sure enough her chin suddenly came to a rest on the back of his seat, her eyes flashing him a devious look.

“I am a wolf after all. Sadly I have no interest in such inane chatter.”

It was a rather mild attack, so he sidestepped it to fire a mild one of his own.

“In that case, we'd be better off engaging in a hot debate over tonight's dinner menu.”

Her lips pouted slightly.

“I would rather hear something more.. spicy from you.”

Her eyes were half-closed as she played up her drunken act by rubbing her ears into his arms. She had a wicked mastery of acting drunk enough to lull others into a false sense of security, so Lawrence pretended it was nothing more than her response to an itch at the base of her ears.

“Spicy? As in, the kind of topic that makes one blush involuntarily?”

“Mm. Aye.”

Were she a mere cat or dog, he could just stroke her head roughly and toss her a treat to pry her off of him. Unfortunately for him, she was a wolf that could eat him whole the moment he let his guard down. He slowly pulled his arm up and balanced his elbow on her head, making her growl in dissatisfaction before she shot him a serious glare.

“Just thinking about how much you've had to drink is enough to make my face red.”

“..I did not drink *that* much.”

Holo's face never betrayed how drunk she really was. In fact it barely changed at all when she drank. But that didn't mean she enjoyed being laughed at indirectly, so she shoved his elbow off of her head and rubbed her face hard.

“Remember to save some for later, so we have something to enjoy on those sunny meadows.”

“I said I did not drink that much.”



With that brusque reply, she retreated to the wagon-bed and plopped herself back down. She seemed genuinely upset. Lawrence figured that meant she had taken care to drink only her share. Of course, she knew he wasn't blaming her, but it was only natural for her to be displeased at being the target of suspicion.

With that thought Lawrence turned around to apologize, and ran smack into her mischievous smile.. which was enough to make him sigh. Everything from the verbal exchange to the concerned look he gave her as he turned to apologize was by her design.

“However, in all honesty I do enjoy dull conversations as well. Especially..”

“..The kind where you get to toy with the pathetic merchant?”

“Hmm? Well.. yes, that is fun too, I suppose.”

The path they were on seemed to be leading them nowhere fast. Surely they should have spotted the meadows by now. Just then, he noticed another path parallel to theirs, which seemed to intersect up ahead. He shrugged and pulled out the map to see what was going on.

“Then what kind of conversation do you like?”

He spoke while looking at the map and road ahead of them, then peering into the woods to try to see around the trees. They definitely weren't on the only road through the forest. It seemed that all the paths here overlapped like an intricate maze, and it was really in their best interests to leave before they got lost.

Just as that idea surfaced in his mind, Lawrence felt someone's eyes burning holes into his back and looked behind him.

“..Not this present conversation, at least, of that you can be certain.”

Her tail swayed slowly from side to side in dissatisfaction. His mind simply went blank, but only for an instant. Boring conversations were a lot like perfunctory ones, and yet there were differences. Lawrence had never had to pay attention to those differences before, which was the reason he was so careless now. So he openly apologized.

“..sorry. What kind of conversation do you like, really?”

When he posed his question a second time, her expression became incredulous.

“Am I but a child to you?”

“What?”

“Are conversations not meant to follow some logical course of topics? Did you believe that by

simply posing your question a second time, I would forget everything else we have said just to obediently reply?”

Just as she finished, the wagon's wheels got caught between some roots and shuddered violently. Lawrence spun around in haste, then immediately turned back. He saw that Holo was sprawled over their baggage, having been getting ready to go to sleep. She wasn't looking at him.

“..”

He was beyond embarrassed. All he could do was turn away and put his hand to his forehead. He'd never encountered anything like this in the days when he had the habit of talking to himself, with only his horse to listen.

He contemplated how he could apologize for this, but realized he'd only dig himself deeper if he tried to cover up his fault. Having finished preparing himself, he apologized.

“Sorry.”

It was just what he'd said a moment ago. But a conversation *was* supposed to follow a logical flow of topics.

“Hmph.”

Her unpleasant half-snorting noise meant she had forgiven him.

“So.. when will we finally leave this forest?”

She must have sipped from the leather wineskin as she spoke. Ultimately, she still hadn't revealed what kind of foolish conversations she enjoyed.

“I've heard that forest spirits can conjure up new paths.. does the Wisewolf Holo conveniently have such an ability?”

“In fields of wheat, it would not be impossible.”

“Oh, really? That I'd like to see.”

“If we ever get the chance.”

She answered coldly, but if he voiced a complaint he'd only spring her trap and give her an excuse to seek recompense. He swallowed his words at the last possible second.

“But really, this forest is pretty odd.”

Their wagon rattled as they crossed an intersection.

“Odd?”

“There are so many paths in this forest. Too many, even if they were made for transporting lumber.”

He wondered whether it was best to just turn back right then and there, before they truly became lost. It was almost noon, and the moment the sun passed overhead the shadows in the forest would change directions. He hadn’t forgotten his way, but once the shadows reversed it was easy to become all turned around.

“..”

“What?”

Lawrence fell into thought, and Holo addressed him.

“My, are we getting lost?”

Sure enough, that evil smirk was on her face again. That would anger any traveling merchant, even if he knew it was a friendly joke told for his own sake.

“We’ve come all this way, and I still remember the route we took.. we’re fine.”

He knew he was letting his emotions get the better of him. Perhaps realizing that, she slowly and silently wagged her tail, then let her half-erect body fall down hard upon their baggage.

“Aye.. you have spent your life traveling after all.”

The way she took her comment back made it feel like she was apologizing for meddling in his business.

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The carriage continued rattling along on its way. The paths continued criss-crossing, heading every which way except for out of the woods. Time slipped away little by little in this manner, until they finally came to a 5-way intersection. One would have long broken down, praying to the heavens for mercy, had this been a regular journey.

Lawrence stopped the wagon and looked up at the sky. It was just after noon.. the best time to lie down in the meadows. At this point, making it to the meadows would be less and less worthwhile. That was doubly true if he took the time needed for their return trip into account.

On the other hand, they had already come this far. Turning back without at least getting a

glimpse of the meadow's magnificence was ridiculous. That, and he had no desire to prove Holo right having brushed off her snide comment.

“..”

They just sat there as he pondered what to do in the driver's box, not even thinking to drive the horse onward.

It was all too obvious that the rational thing to do was turn around instead of plodding ahead like this. But if he revealed that this was all they would get after coming all this way, what would Holo say? He knew it was just his stubborn pride, but he simply couldn't bring himself to accept the truth.

All the while her tail wagged like she was hearing his internal debate. She was clearly provoking him, but as he finally raised the reins to spur the horse, it finally hit him: if they got completely lost all because of his stubbornness, what then?

“..”

With that, he finally decided. Turning back was the best choice. A moment later-

“My.. you truly are adorable.”

Having finally broken the silence, she propped her face up on her elbows on the edge of the driver's box.

“Would you also like a pair of ears and a tail like mine?”

“What.. what are you talking about..”

She ignored his stiff tone.

“What I mean is that I have never seen a more transparent male.”

“What?”

She heard the hint of impatience in his reply and sat up, drawing her face next to his. He leaned away, noticing how her smile had changed.

“You brushed off my warning, so now you find it difficult to accept. And yet, venturing forward may be even riskier.. whatever shall you do?”

She was right on the nose, and only pressed closer to his face as he turned away instinctively, still wearing the same smile.

“You are clearly being reckless over a trivial matter.”

This creature who had lived for centuries, who called herself the Wisewolf, was now so close that he felt her breath on his face. He wanted desperately to escape, but he was as far back on the seemingly-tiny driver's seat as he could get. Her amber eyes - like those of a mind-reader - were right in front of his.

“And yet..”

Her tone was suddenly gentle, almost disappointingly so. She had drawn so close to him that she could swallow him whole, only to abruptly lean away again. Lawrence was unable to follow her sudden change in attitude, and could only stared dimly at her as she sat on the back of the driver's box.

“And yet, there is no way I can be angry.. not when I consider your motivations.”

She was gazing down on him, being seated on the raised platform behind him, their usual positions reversed. It was difficult to bear without anger, given her dignified appearance.

“You wish to have the advantage, even if you have to act tough, no? That is so childish a notion that I cannot muster any anger.”

Were she looking at him in mockery, he might have had a chance to counter her. But he knew there was no way to refute her when he was acting like a little boy, especially when she made no secret of having no interest in competing and smiled down on him like a benevolent older sister instead.

He was completely helpless in the face of such an attitude. And worse, she'd read his thoughts precisely, so it was clear he couldn't hide them from her even if he wanted to.

“Your problem is..”

As she spoke she hopped down into the driver's box and sat beside him. She was now looking up at him again, their usual positions reinstated.

“..That you base your every decision on the scales.”

“..Scales?”

“Mm. Which way they tilt, who has the upper hand. Your failure directly results from this mindset.. although from a merchant's perspective, this may be the best attitude to assume.”

She spoke while dragging the blanket off the wagon bed and onto her lap, causing a wave of rustling. Then she smacked his hand lightly (which was still holding the reins) and continued.

“Just how long do you intend to hold those?”

“..Huh? How long? Shouldn't we start heading back now?”

He asked in surprise, completely missing her point, and an incredulous look immediately surfaced on her face.

“Honestly.. have you already forgotten what I said? You utterly lack any ability to see where a conversation is heading.”

He recalled her saying something like that, but what was she getting at? What did it have to do with him letting go of the reins? Was she trying to snare him in some complex trap again? Just as his thoughts turned to that, he finally understood.

“Oh!!!”

“Jeez, took you long enough.”

He was at a complete loss for words. It was so obvious, now that he thought about it. All he had to do was recall their discussion before they went into the forest: what did he say they would do if they ran into trouble getting through the forest?

“You should have done that from the very start, but you just had to force your way deeper and deeper into the mire. It is not my cleverness that leads you into traps, but your own stupidity.”

She gently tugged at him, making his fists open and ball back up, letting loose the reins as he flinched. Now that she said it, it sank in just how many obvious chances he'd had to realize it before.

“You see now that you need not struggle to some meadows to make me happy, yes?”

She flapped open the blanket with a *swish* and effortlessly wrapped it around Lawrence. His stubborn insistence on reaching the meadows was also caused by him being unable to follow their earlier conversation. What had she said she enjoyed doing during a trip?

“You mean your preferred topic from all the boring ones?”

“Mm. If you had but confirmed that, you might have put me in a great mood without even forcing yourself to take me to some meadow.”

Her voice sounded quite happy. And she probably *was* happy, seeing him receive wave after wave of her attacks.

“Then, just what kind of conversation *do* you enjoy most?”

His eyes opened wide just as he finished asking his question. She replied not with surprise, not with anger. She neither laughed at him nor berated him. She actually seemed embarrassed.

“Hehe.. to tell you the truth, I am only able to say this out loud since the conversation has come to such a point..”

She giggled and shrugged, looking extremely embarrassed. If her favorite kind of conversation *was* this embarrassing, then this probably was the only way she could admit it. After all, she had a towering advantage over him right now; he could only listen.

“*This* is the kind of conversation I like the most, the kind I can drift off to sleep on. The boring kind I can listen to, the kind with topics that make one's ears itch..”

She turned away after saying that, looking genuinely embarrassed for once. It was true; nodding off to another's words wasn't much different from enjoying a lullaby. And now that he thought about it, she *did* always fall asleep while they talked.

He'd always guessed she did it on purpose, but apparently it was just another of her quirks. He stole a glance at her still-turned-away face. It was quite red; she truly did seem embarrassed.

“What do you think? Rather foolish, is it not?”

“..As much as it pains me to say so, I'm afraid it is.”

She turned to face him once again with resentful eyes, knocking her head against his.

“But who is it that has the advantage now?”

It went without saying that he was the foolish one, and that if he'd only asked her earlier the present advantage would have been his.

He didn't even have to insist on going to the meadows or risk his pride. Indeed, she might have been the one to act rashly. But she was the one who saw where things were headed, so she was the victor.

“It's my loss.”

“Of course.”

She shifted slightly, her ears twitched, and she yawned.

“So.. now that you know my preference, will you not find some topic to indulge it?”

She begged him like a child, despite holding the reins. But he knew perfectly well that he couldn't resent her for it just because he felt miserable about his defeat. And so, with no other

choice, he began listing their dinner options.

He began with their usual supplies; dried fruit and bland bread. If they spent some time in the forest, they could perhaps even catch a quail or rabbit. He chuckled when her ears flipped up at the mention of this.

Sure enough, as he continued chattering away about this and that inane topic, he eventually heard her breathing soundly in slumber. It stood to reason that she would be tired after fooling around with him like this, and it made him wonder how long it would be before he could give as good as he got.

Being on the meadow might have been warmer than being under the blankets, but it didn't matter when the two of them were under it. Especially since Holo's body was warmer than usual, like a child's.

He watched her sleep, in awe of her unguarded appearance. It didn't even look like she would wake up if he pinched her nose or ran his finger along the fuzz inside her ear. And seeing the peaceful look on her face made him want to, after having been made the fool.

And, as if God had heard his plea, she suddenly lost her balance. As he reached out to support her, he took the chance to sneak in a counter-attack and wrapped his arm around her slender shoulders, as if to emphasize that he was her protector. Then, as he prepared to close his own eyes..

“You pass.”

He felt his body stiffen at her soft utterance. So this was where she wanted the conversation to end. She looked up at him with a devilish smile, her fangs glimmering under her lips.

“One simply has to lay their trap at the pool of water accumulated under the waterfall..”

All he could do to keep the conversation flowing was complete her sentence.

“And all the stupid fish will fall right in.”

She giggled and nodded merrily. He could only look up at the sky, utterly defeated to the point where it was too much to bear. He clamped the arm around her shoulders gently around her neck, and her tail began wagging happily.

Damn it.. why was he so stupid? So pathetically stupid? A detour like this was business suicide for a merchant; he'd lost the moment he decided to take it. He shoved his head into the noose himself, not even thinking about who held the rope. And who else could it be?

His head flopped over onto hers, his energy drained completely. It was his way of saying that

this was where their conversation ended.



Black Wolf's Cradle

She could finally take a breather after she unloaded the hay. There was still snow lying around here and there, but Fleur was sweating profusely in the spring sunlight, being unaccustomed to physical labor.

“The hay's excellent this year. Our animals should be well-fed.”

Such was the casual appraisal given by the man from Jones company as they bundled it up. Fleur brushed the hay off her clothes and beamed a wide smile as she spoke with the man, who was old enough to be her father.

“And since they're well-fed, they'll be nice and plump come winter.”

“That's right. So this is all of it? Can I take the whole lot?”

“For how much?”

The man scratched his chin with his pencil, then remembered the payment. He counted the bundles of hay again and took his time to reply.

“17 Likit.”

“The market rate's 20.”

At that, the man just twirled his pen between his fingers. It was the kind of gesture that a merchant unconsciously made when facing an inferior opponent.

“You should have gone higher. 25.”

“Ora?!”

Fleur spun around to face the old merchant butting into the conversation. Her opponent scratched his temple with the pen, then smiled and tilted his head.

“Alright. Since you're so honest, we'll make it 20.”

“Only if you include the rental fee for the wagon.”

What little hair remained on Ora's head was silvery, due to treating it with egg whites every day. He faced down their not-so-young opponent as though staring down at a boy.

“Of course. And the information fee too.”

“God go with you.”

Fleur said nothing as she replayed the conversation in her head. She had nothing better to do while she waited for Ora to unload the hay from their wagon.

“Let's go.”

That's all he said as he walked away, having returned their wagon and cleared their account balance. He had a strong build, and was able to walk quickly even while he carried so much on his back. The loading zone around the port was crowded, but he wove through that crowd quickly, like some sort of magician.

Fleur was still unaccustomed to wearing a face-scarf to conceal her gender, so she had a tough time walking in a straight line. She managed to finally catch up to him when they entered an alley where they had to move in single file.

Children were crying above and mice squealed as they scrambled to avoid their feet. Cats were heard calling out from windows. Not long ago, she wouldn't have dreamed she'd ever end up in a place like this. But she knew people had no choice but to adapt to their circumstances.

She tickled a cat's throat as she passed the sleeping feline beside a flowerpot on a windowsill. Living a normal life really didn't seem that bad.

“Milady.”

His angry tone startled the cat and it hopped off the windowsill inside its home. She shot him an accusing glare, but was met with a one that was far more intimidating.

“Are you reflecting on your error?”

Oddly enough, Fleur smiled in the face of blame from older and more experienced people. It wasn't because she was brave or crazy; it just reminded her of the times she drove her teacher crazy when she was younger.

“Oh, yes, sorry. I am.”

Of course, she hadn't been doing anything of the sort after Ora took over the bargaining.

“You know, I was hoping you'd appreciate that I didn't get angry with that guy for trying to cut below the market rate. But I guess you're just in a bad mood today.”

“Milady.”

Ora frowned at her joke. His eyebrows almost crept up onto his dome-like head. His face was

like a stone statue when he bargained, but outside of business it took on many different forms. It commanded respect.

“Don’t get angry.. and didn't I tell you not to call me 'Milady?’”

“Then please try to behave like a merchant.”

He stood up so tall that she had little choice but to avert her eyes. She was always “behaving like a merchant.” After all, she wasn't a noble anymore, no longer Fleur von Eiterzentel Mariel Boland, the eleventh heiress to the Boland family name. Though she was, in fact, starting to miss that ridiculously long title.

“Of course I act like one. I transport enough herring for my hands to smell like them. And I return with a wagon full of hay.”

“Wonderful. With that I'm sure no one will even realize how terrified you are of riding horseback.”

He wasn't joking around. He was clearly quite angry, and she knew why. But his strictness made it obvious that he was trying to underscore his point.

“12 Likit to buy the herring. 4 for tariffs. A half for wheat bread, dried lamb, pickled pork, cheese and wine. 2 for the horse and wagon rental. So where does that leave you?”

Fleur sighed behind her scarf at his challenge. They had spent 18 and a half Likit on this load. Had they accepted the Jones Company's offer of 17, they'd be in the red.

Nobles were used to taking the game of give and take lightly, but not merchants. When they gave something, they charged a higher price in return. It was the only way to avoid going hungry.

“You know I wasn't going to accept 17.”

“Were you now?”

He just walked away without so much as glancing at her. His attitude was getting to her.

“Are you implying that I'm just some coward who won't dare to argue a little?!”

Hearing that, he turned around.

“No, but even if you stubbornly say that 20 is the market value, you can't prove it. And not just that. In business there's nothing worse than an endless debate. So we merchants always knowingly pick numbers that'll end up at a healthy compromise.”

“That's why you asked for 25?”

He nodded, but it was such a lazy nod that it was obvious he was too tired to discuss the matter any further.

What he said was common sense among merchants, of course. He'd practically been a merchant since the day he was born, having even managed the accounts of large companies.

He called her “Milady” because his former master was the chief merchant of the Boland family, so he could freely enter and leave their homes as he wished.

However, that master died just as Fleur reached marriageable age, and shortly thereafter the declining Boland family finally collapsed. Thus, they lost their ties with the company Ora worked for.

Fleur didn't see Ora again until his new master became her husband. That wasn't so long ago, but the memories were starting to fade.

“Well, Milady? How much did you buy that hay for?”

She didn't have time to think about an answer. It seemed her situation was always changing before she could catch her breath. Her fallen family title had been bought by a rich merchant, and now that rich merchant was going bankrupt.

Was he really asking how much she bought the hay for? She was amazed; she couldn't believe he'd bother her over something like this. It was just too funny.

“Two.”

However, she had been raised to mask her true feelings in social situations. So she answered him matter-of-factly, upon which all emotion was wiped from Ora's face. He raised both his hands exaggeratedly and sped up - he seemed beyond angry now.

After all, he was the one paying the loans for them to transport herring and hay between villages. And if they were already paying over 18 for herring, then even the 20 she'd asked for wasn't enough. She was well aware of that, but still had her reasons. When she'd finally caught up with the wrathful speed-walker, she explained.

“The villagers had it hard. Even their sickles were rusty. They complained that they couldn't survive if they couldn't get at least two.”

“Is that a fact?”

She got back that cold reply - certainly not the kind of response she'd get from a regular person. But even if her family had fallen, she was still nobility, so she angrily shot back at him.

“You think I’m lying?!”

Ora halted for a moment, but didn't respond to her. Then he began walking even faster. It was obvious who was wrong here. Fleur wasn't some noble who hired him, she was just a normal person trying to learn his trade. So she ran up that narrow alley and caught up to him again.

“I'm sorry, Ora.. But I get so angry when you call me 'Milady.'”

He finally stopped, and she turned back to discover a bitter smile on his face.

“You need to learn how to make better excuses if you want to become a real merchant.”

She shrugged and took some of the bags off his back. As they left the alley, she finally caught sight of their home. It was in an area filled with similar houses.

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“Then, milady, you lost in the end, after all that hard work?”

Beltra, the maid, was an honest sort. She always spoke her mind.

“I did not.”

“Then what actually happened?”

Beltra wasn't just shorter than Fleur, she was also a year younger. Her background was also entirely different. However, Fleur could only defer to her when it came to managing the affairs of the household.

Without money they couldn't even afford bread. In the past, she could still depend on the fame and fortune of her family as a noble. But those comforts were beyond her reach now. Fleur pulled off her scarf and coat and turned to leave.

“Milady, I don't know much, but I know what Ora said.”

“Don’t call me 'milady!’”

“Milady, wait!”

Fleur ignored Beltra and ran into the next room. She heard the maid sigh, but continued through that room and into the corridor. After passing the bathroom she ran up to the second floor.

She could see the garden that Beltra carefully tended through the wooden windows along the

staircase. It was the garden that supplied them with vegetables, spices and herbs. Sometimes it even produced enough for them to sell a bit in the market for some meat.

By comparison, what did Fleur have to offer the household? She knew it wasn't much. She couldn't blame Beltra for losing her temper. Even a child could add numbers, but she couldn't drive the price of hay below two Likit. She realized she wasn't cut out to be a merchant. She just couldn't be that hard on the people who were once her family's charges.

“Milady.”

She heard a knock on her door and Ora's voice. In the past, when she rose to open a door - no matter how decrepit it was - it was twenty steps away from her desk. These days she only had to walk three.

“Don't call me 'milady.’”

Behind the door was a stone-faced Ora.

“Beltra was in tears. She said you weren't listening to her.”

“..”

“Merciless” would be a fine choice of words right now. Ora could read people better than Fleur could. He claimed it was a vital skill for trade, but it seemed just as useful for education.

It was tough to chastize people and make them feel genuinely bad about it, but he knew using Beltra was the best way to do that. Fleur nodded in surrender, before nodding even harder and breathing in deeply.

“Alright, alright..”

“Well?”

“I'll go apologize to Beltra, and be sure to listen to her well.”

“..”

“..And I'll finish dinner.”

Ora smiled, and closed the door as he said “please just rest.” Despite sighing, she soon smiled after sitting down in her shoddy chair. Everything they had was confiscated, and all of their privileges were auctioned off. All the servants were gone. She was now living in housing meant for servants and low-ranking city officials. She was practically living in poverty. Forget feeding horses, she wasn't even lucky enough to feed pigs for her own meat.

It was a pretty typical bad end for a noble, but she didn't feel too bad about it. It was just that common sense for merchants was so different from common sense for nobles. At times she would be infuriated, but even then she still tried her best to adjust.

The only reason she could live even this comfortably was because Ora took her under his wing and Beltra - her closest servant - stayed behind to take care of her. They were the ones that made her realize that she hadn't lost everyone she could call family, and that not everyone in the world had become her enemy.

That was enough to keep her going, but she was well aware that they needed money to survive. They couldn't afford to make mistakes like this in business.

“I'm a merchant..”

She tried to encourage herself, then made her way back downstairs to apologize to Beltra.

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The following afternoon, after Fleur had choked down the wheat porridge she was finally getting used to, Ora spoke with her.

“If the hay is that good, then we should deal in horses.”

“Horses?”

“I've heard that war broke out on the far end of the southern sea. If that's true, then prices for horses should be going up tremendously - as though they had wings.”

Fleur never underestimated Ora's ability to collect information, but she did like to challenge him and regard him with a bit of suspicion.

“If it's *that* certain, then surely someone's already beaten us to it, though?”

“Ah, but we needn't be the first. If the profit's *that* good we can be the second or third.”

As she spoke, Ora picked off the mold on the bread Fleur was eating. Fleur had frowned the first time she had to eat moldy bread, but after a while she got used to it. When she lived in the manor, she never realized that all of the servants in the kitchen had to settle for moldy bread. It moved her heart to hear that, but now she was doing the same.

“Deal in horses, huh?”

Horses were a luxury, and not very cost-effective to raise. Back when the Boland family name was reputable, they still had some property and thus still had some income - and it was mostly from the tariffs farmers paid to collect hay on their property. If the demand for hay was enough

to drive prices up, some of those farmers wouldn't even be able to feed their horses now.

“I'll check with the companies when I go collect payment for the hay.”

Fleur replied while dipping the bread Ora had de-molded into some porridge.

“Please don't let them drive the prices down.”

Fleur smiled upon hearing that. She turned away, but not because of his comment.

“Not again.. I wonder how it's getting in?”

Beltra noticed what Fleur had spotted and spoke, before heaving herself up from the chair. A dog was sitting quietly next to the bathroom door leading to the kitchen.. well, it was more a pup, really.

“Did it nibble into the sacks of wheat again?”

There were a lot of strays in town, but they never realized it before, having lived in their large manor surrounded by forests and plains. Beltra considered them pests, but Fleur felt differently.

“Come here.”

The dog had jumped up to run away as Beltra approached it, but when it spotted Fleur's outstretched hand with bits of bread in it, it ran between Beltra's legs to Fleur.

“Milady..”

Beltra, whose everyday kitchen troubles included the mice, cats and dogs, looked at her accusingly. Fleur raised her head when the dog had lapped up the bread.

“My husband only knew how to take from others.. I've no compunction to be the same.”

It seemed the dog was familiar with the ways of the world, and happily devoted its loyalty to her temporarily in thanks. It sat still as she patted its head, even wagging its tail. But it was far from being a knight, and she was far from being a noble. Beltra picked the dog up and shooed it outside through the open window.

“You are far too gentle, milady.”

“Isn't it normal to have a heart?”

It was a savage comeback, and Fleur knew it. As expected, Beltra was hit pretty hard by it. Ora jumped to her rescue.

“We were all there when you were his wife. My master may not have been a great person, but we still have to survive somehow. Or did you have a better way than trading as a merchant, milady?”

Fleur was far from having options. She knew well what it meant to be a fallen noble. And, as a young woman, she had even fewer options open to her.

“You can only give away what you have already earned. Even a noble would cry to hear you speak like this.”

“Well, the accountants of any kind noble are forever in tears.”

“Indeed. But I don’t want to see Beltra in tears.”

Fleur stuffed the rest of her bread into her mouth before standing up.

“Then, I’m off to trade. This time I’ll bring back some profit.”

Beltra quietly observed her as she held her darkened apron. She seemed to have finally heard what she hoped to hear, and smiled.

“Please take care.”

They were no longer in that large, clean manor.. but Fleur’s smile was still the same.

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A frozen river stopped flowing, but during a northern winter it wasn’t just boats that stopped moving as a result. The entire port would become lifeless. It was like the port thawed out with the coming of spring, as boats began arriving and departing. That’s how Ora put it, anyway, and it sounded about right. On a sunny day like this, the port was busier still.

“Okay, here’s your payment.”

While the company still tried to push the price down to 17 Likit instead of 20, they didn’t hesitate to pay up in the end. Merchants were such odd creatures, thought Fleur as she finalized the deal, before finally getting to what Ora had said earlier.

“Horses?”

“Yes. We’ve heard that war’s broken out, and that horses are in demand.”

“Oh.. right, right, horses..”

The merchant scratched his chin with his pencil again, before looking up and closing his eyes.

“Just feeding horses means having to pay the tariffs to gather the hay, and if the price of hay is rising then it's too costly for farmers to keep them.”

“Meaning they'll probably be selling them, is that right?”

In order to keep from being swindled, one had to understand what others were thinking and consider their replies before making a deal. That's what Ora always did, and he made it seem too easy.

Fleur nodded. The man made a “hmm” sound and stared blankly at her.

“Surely you don't think you're the first to have that idea?”

He was looking down on her like she was some stupid apprentice boy. Perhaps he had noticed he was talking to a “she,” and a young one at that.

“No, but even if we're the second or third to the punch, we can still earn a lot.”

She recited Ora's words in her subtly passionate manner. The man crossed his lips with his pencil, as if trying to keep from smiling. But if Fleur smiled back in revenge it would be her loss, so she kept a straight face under her scarf.

“Sorry about that. You seem to be growing more and more each day. And you're right.. as you can see, we're too swamped in our daily business to go out and buy horses right now. So if you can find anyone who's selling, we might just be willing to buy.”

Merchants always spoke vaguely.

“Then you're saying you'll definitely buy them?”

Her opponent frowned at her follow-up question.

“It's tough to commit when you might just bring back thin and disobedient horses. That would be an embarrassment.”

So he didn't trust her? Well, only a noble would react in such a pompous way. She opted to apologize.

“Well, even if we don't buy them, there will still be buyers. The market's good, so if you buy them at a good price you'll be able to sell them at a good price. It shouldn't be a problem.”

“I see.”

“That said..”

“?”

He closed his ledger and stuffed it under his arm.

“I still think it'll be difficult. After all, horses are fickle creatures. Even if they seem obedient when you buy them, they can turn on a new master just like that. Happens all the time.”

“Yeah, that's true..”

Before, in the manor, she was always hearing about how difficult horses could be to manage. She'd learned first-hand how flighty horses could be when she had to find and rent them. If she struggled hard to buy one and could only sell it at a low price, even she would cry like Beltra.

“Then.. how about this?”

“Hmm?”

“If you have the capital to buy horses, there are other opportunities.”

“Such as?”

The merchant smiled, and pulled his ledger back out to open it.

“No attitude, no risk of illness, no food or grooming necessary. Even an inexperienced merchant won't have trouble with this product. Horses are a risk compared to this.”

He made a good point, even if she knew he was shady. She wasn't looking for a lesson from him, but she couldn't help but be interested by his offer.

“What would that be?”

“Clothing.”

“..Clothing.”

As she repeated his words, he showed her a page in his ledger.

“Here are the costs. And here are the retail prices. The profit's not as high as with horses, but.. well, as you see every article is profitable.”

He was right.. as long as this wasn't an attempt to swindle her. And he'd hardly had time to come up with a swindle on the spot. Thinking this, she nodded.

“It’s a stable investment.”

He closed the ledger as he spoke, and Fleur's mouth opened.

“But what kind of clothing should I sell?”

“Well that would be entirely up to you.”

He made it sound simple, but Fleur had always had others choose her clothing. She knew nothing about fashion. Just as her thoughts turned to Ora, and how she should ask him, the man suddenly clapped his hands together and spoke.

“Ah, that's right.. one of our clients has good eyes for that sort of thing.”

“Good eyes?”

“Yes. He's helped us buy clothing before.. quite a brilliant salesman. He always sells clothes really quickly. He's been looking to expand his business, and was looking for someone to invest some capital.”

Fleur knew she wasn't all that bright. She knew she still couldn't quite grasp the subtler aspects of merchantry. But she knew a bit about what he was saying.

“You mean.. I supply the capital, and we split the profits?”

“Exactly. Not just the raw profits, either. You'll learn about the clothing market. And he's got contacts at every point in the supply chain, so he can get good prices.”

“Well..”

It sounded like a good chance had just fallen into her lap.. quite a stroke of luck. Not everyone in this world was malicious, it seemed. The man flipped over his ledger and gave her a name.

“His name is Milton Pabst.”

That was surely a noble's name.

~~~

Whenever Fleur had some cash, she couldn't help but do a little shopping. She bought some of the cheese Beltra was fond of, and some wine the Ora enjoyed from a particular village. Then, she headed home. They didn't have much to spend, but she hoped they wouldn't get upset at her for buying them gifts. She had, after all, found a good lead on a worthwhile new business endeavour.

“Clothing?”

Fleur had handed Ora a glass of wine to take advantage of his improved mood when he drank. He closed his eyes and sniffed the wine as they spoke. When she finally mentioned the conversation she had with the man at Jones Company, she couldn't even tell if he was listening.

“So that's what we're gonna try.. Ora?”

Hearing his name called out, Ora looked at her.

“Sorry, I've missed this smell so much.. Clothes? That's what you wanna do?”

“There's a man helping Jones Company sell clothing. Apparently he wants someone to invest, so he can handle the whole process from the top down next time.”

“I see..”

Ora again smelt the wine with his beak-like nose, before he stopped breathing at all. Nobles would never appreciate the little things like Ora did. It made her forget her anger and smile.

“His name's Milton Pabst.”

As soon as she mentioned the name, Ora's wrinkled eyes opened with a strange gleam.

“Pabst?”

“You know him?”

Ora slowly exhaled.

“Mhm.. of course.”

Ora downed the last of his wine before setting the glass down on the table. It was a quiet evening, and Beltra was still out at the market.

“His ancestor was a renowned knight. Brave, strong, and elegant.. the spitting image of someone from a romantic tale. But he was also merciful, and loved his family. From what I recall, at least thirty people have succeeded the Pabst name.”

Having a large family wasn't out of the ordinary.. even having several mistresses. And despite the old joke that trying to name the children of an aristocrat was like reading the Old Testament of the Bible, it was actually quite rare for someone to have that many children. In other words, his ancestor was a real big shot.

“Since his kids couldn't have all inherited land from him, this guy's probably a legitimate Pabst.”

You say he's helping Jones Company sell clothes?"

"Hm.. ah, huh?"

Fleur responded dimly, distracted by a goat that just happened to be eating a potted plant nearby. It had probably escaped when someone forget to tie it up after buying it. It was such an odd event that she just stared at it for a while, before she nervously tried to reply.

"Um.. uh, ah.."

"..well, he's probably selling them to nobles. We once tried that, you know.. we hired the second- and third-in-line from noble houses, who had nowhere else to go. We were hoping to sell enough fancy clothes to drive the Cobbles and Smiths out of business, but nobles' fashion trends are notoriously fickle; we needed to know who to sell what to."

"I see.."

"So did you go and meet Pabst?"

The goat had finally decided that the leaves on the plant weren't tasty. It bleated once and slowly hobbled off.

"No.. I decided not to rush into things, and to check with you first."

"Well, well.. perhaps Milady is finally learning."

"I've failed twice after deciding on my own, after all."

Ora smiled and coughed gently, then pointed at the coins on the table. Fleur had spent some of the twenty Likit that were there already.

"Hmm?"

She tilted her head and heard Ora sigh in response.

"But you've still much to learn. The road will be hard. You didn't think to check the coins they paid you with."

"What about them? Did they underpay me somehow?"

Just as she was about to say "impossible," Ora wistfully shook his head.

"Look how worn the edges are. Do you think a moneychanger will accept them? We might have to settle for 90% of their face value.."

She looked at the coins nervously, and saw that there were indeed some misshapen or worn ones there.

“Well, even if I told you everything, you still wouldn't remember it all. It's best to learn one thing at a time. However..”

“..However?”

“If you were just another little apprentice who I could beat, I might respond differently.”

How rare to hear him joking around like that.. it seemed he really did appreciate the wine.

“I remember the first time I got a good beating.. I cried for a week.”

He happily eyed the coins as he swept them into a wooden box, then closed the lid.

“Alright, so let's talk about this new idea of yours.”

“Alright..”

“Well? Tell me your thoughts.”

The sudden change of topic left her at a loss.

“It looks good to me.”

“Really?”

He replied gently before picking up a quill and noting the coins in an old ledger. Because of Fleur's oversight, he ended up having to write “net loss” under the totals column.

“Am I wrong?”

“No. If you're fine with it, go ahead. That guy was right, after all; horses die, fall ill, and get hurt, but clothes will last for years. Back when I was selling them, it usually took three years before they couldn't be sold anymore. So it's hard to lose a lot, and it's a great way to cut your teeth.”

“So, then..”

He gave a definitive nod in response to her stutter.

“This'll be your third time taking responsibility for an entire job.”

When she lived in the mansion, she simply ate her meals and wore the clothes given to her. That's all she had to do. It was the decisionless life of the wife of a noble. All she had to do was

sit there and listen to those around her.

She was still getting used to being a trader. She couldn't see through the deceit, and had a hard time talking back to them. But it was exhilarating to have her own say in things. She breathed in deeply and nodded.

“But you've got to listen to my advice, okay?”

If he wasn't happy with her performance, he'd let her know. And if he wasn't happy, then she was probably failing. She knew exactly what he wanted to hear.

“Of course.”

“May God's blessing be upon you.”

He murmured softly as he closed the ledger. A moment later, Beltra returned from the marketplace, almost as if she had timed her entrance.

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Fallen nobles, illegitimate children of nobles, and actual nobles; despite their different circumstances, they all had a famous family name. Many of them clung to the past in order to continue living. Yet those like Fleur - whose family name was bought, then became worthless - were only burdened by their names.

That's why she covered her face, and tended to not report her family name. This left her with little choice but to depend on Ora's connections to find jobs, and even then she sometimes had to use her name. But most of the people she worked with were sympathetic and kept quiet about it.

This time, however, she was going to rely on her own power to deal with Milton Pabst.. no hiding behind her name. Or at least, that was her hope.

“Have we met each other at a ball?”

That was what Pabst said after they had introduced themselves and shook hands. He was a young man with tidy golden hair. His clothes weren't extravagant, but one could tell the effort he put into his wardrobe. If she hadn't been going to him to do business, she may not have even guessed he was a man from a large family.

Fleur's own hands could no longer be described as “beautiful, milky hands in satin evening gloves.” They were still a prestigious pair, compared to Beltra's, but they no longer demonstrated this fact. Milton noticed that the look in her eyes had dulled, and continued.

“Ah, right! That one organized by Mr. Milan.”

“Oh!”

She gasped, realizing that it was indeed one of the balls she had attended in the past.

“We have met, yet it seems you don’t recognize me.”

Young noble girls shook more hands than they touched loaves of bread. Even if they barely made contact in each handshake, the sheer number of times this ceremony repeated often left their hands swollen after an evening outing.

“But that’s to be expected. You caught the eye of so many.”

That was when Ora's predecessor still lived, and the family name still meant something. In other words, back when Fleur was still a bride-to-be.

“Your name should be..”

“Fleur Boland.”

It had been a long time since she spoke her name. It made her a bit nostalgic, and a bit embarrassed at the same time. However, the embarrassment she felt was less over the actual utterance than the fact that it was spoken in a tavern facing the harbor.

“Ah yes.. the eldest in the Boland line.. the one whose hand was struck by Mrs. Dian, known for her evil character.”

“Oh!”

This time she was genuinely surprised. Thankfully they weren't at some social function. She covered her mouth as Pabst smiled.

“..And the one whose hand was sought by many young knights; were you aware?”

He quickly ate some beans, possibly to politely stop smiling. But that only embarrassed her further, and made her cover her face, wanting to escape.



“Tis a shame what happened in the end. Enough to make one want to laugh and cry.”

She knew he wasn't implying that she'd cried for weeks; she calmed herself and breathed in deeply under her scarf, then nodded.

“After all, we can hardly decide our destinies and futures. The only ones with that kind of power are seated on far grander chairs.”

As he poured wine into her glass, she noted that while he wasn't as elegant as a noble, he also wasn't as rude as knight. He was more like a playful nephew.

“Your entire family..”

“My entire family fell from that chair, yes. But there is still a place for me in this world.. although I must admit I never would have guessed it was as a merchant.”

He nodded, squinting from the sunlight. He stared at his wine as he replied.

“I'm but the third son of the second mistress. I've no land, not even a scrap the size of my palm, only the Pabst name and some coin. I do not even have the equipment and horses necessary to do proper business and marry a noble, nor the artistic merit to write poetry. And yet, I never expected such things, so I've no complaints.”

“And that's why you began to trade?”

It seemed he'd been expelled from his home. He once again ate some beans, this time to conceal a smile of bitterness.

“Lucky for me, the Pabst name opens many doors. My love of wine, food, and talk leads me to many dinners when I travel, so I always find places in need of my kind. Indeed, it seems there's a place for me everywhere I go.”

After Fleur's husband died, and the family's various holdings and properties were sold off, she earned her servants' admiration by taking it all in stride. But that wasn't her acting tough - she was just rolling with life's punches. That was the kind of “toughness” she was feeling now from Pabst.

“I hear you're quite the trader.”

“Haha.. it's embarrassing being praised, but I will admit that I'm confident.”

There were many who abused their family name to make a living. Milton, who left his home to trade, seemed to understand that he could only keep soaring in the heavens like an angel for so long; when he lost his wings, that superiority and prestige would be gone with them.

Frankly speaking, Fleur admired him for realizing his place in the world and standing on his own feet. So much so that she unconsciously kept talking.

“Just what is it.. your method..?”

According to Ora, anyone who revealed his methods wasn't fit to be called a merchant. She immediately regretted asking the question so stupidly, but Pabst squinted and revealed an obviously-exaggerated smile. As she fumbled around trying to find the words to salvage the situation, he raised his eyes and spoke.

“Facing yourself, and understanding yourself.”

She didn't know what he meant. She just stared into his beautiful blue eyes.

“That's my method. Lots of my friends trade, but they treat trades as one-time deals. They treat themselves as being on the same level as their customers, and so they're doomed to not leave an impression. Not me; I tell my customers that the Pabst name can open the doors of opportunity. That way, even if they laugh, they remember me and all the good qualities of the clothes I sell - and keep selling. Since I always brought good clothes, selling them wasn't a problem.”

The words flowed out of his mouth like water, and he smiled when he finished.

“And any business partner would treasure that.”

He downed the rest of his wine, and poured himself some more. Fleur was silent, but not because of what he said. The awe she felt at finding a kindred spirit filled her chest and blocked her throat.

“Haha.. did I leave you speechless?”

“No, no..”

“However-”

Pabst handed the shop owner a coin, who was handing him some more wine. He continued.

“I did all of this because I have a goal.”

When she heard that, Fleur could practically see an illusory girl standing behind him.. but that didn't turn out to be the case at all.

“I want to.. show off to my family.”

Once again, beans were being eaten to conceal a smile. Fleur regarded him seriously.

“I'm not doing this to honor the Pabst name. I want to prove that they can expel me, but I'll still do well. I want to be able to stand tall before them, even if I have to kneel to get to the point where I can do so.. well, as a merchant, of course.”

Such determination.. Fleur found it difficult to keep her hand from moving. Had they not been at a noisy wine tavern by the business sector, and had the rough table been a finer one with a white cloth draped over it, her hand might well have reached out to take his. She only stopped because she'd made up her mind: she was going to work with him.

“So..”

“Yes?”

Her throat still felt like it was stuck; she tilted her chin to speak.

“I hear you're looking for a backer.”

Merchants had no trouble shifting their attitudes as the situation demanded it. She regarded him as a merchant, so she spoke in a merchant's tone. He seemed to be smiling, and she didn't feel this was the wrong course to take.

“That's true.”

She breathed in deeply.

“How much?”

It turned out to be an amount that she could afford.

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That night's soup was so rich with bread, beans, onions and meat that if you ate a couple bowls, you wouldn't be hungry for a couple of days. And in spite of that richness, it was even topped with cheese. It would be perfectly acceptable for a table of nobles. That's how good Beltra was, who tended the understaffed kitchen.

Given how poor the Boland family had become, Beltra had become proficient at using inexpensive ingredients. Even Ora, as experienced a merchant as he was, was shocked when she told him how much they cost. She was just *that* good. When it came to cooking, Beltra's spoon was peerless.

“They were the loaves of bread rejected by the bakery, because they were too tough to eat but were still perfect for soup. I traded some of our extra spices to the lady three houses down for onions, and the meat's just the chickens that wandered into our house.”

When she was younger Fleur had been sternly warned not to set up traps in the backyard. Thus she had always been unaware that traps had been laid to capture the ingredients for their dinner, so it came to her as quite a surprise.

However, such traps had been the work of aged gardeners back in their old residence while Beltra was now using their techniques in the central courtyard. As such, both Fleur and Ora knew perfectly well that these chickens had not just accidentally wandered in.

But there were a lot of animals wandering around town, even more than in the forests and on the plains. “Borrowing” one or two of them wasn't going to cause a fuss. Ora gave her his usual praise but, unusually, Fleur ate without saying anything in appreciation.

“Milady?”

She nearly dropped her spoon, startled by his sudden questioning tone. Because all of their silverware had been sold, it was just a cheap tin spoon. Beltra was sometimes frustrated to catch herself polishing their tinware out of habit, but Fleur much preferred the practicality of such frugal instruments.

“Oh, mm, this tastes good..”

Both of them looked at her, surprised by her nervousness.

“R-really.”

This time, they turned to look at each other. Fleur tore at her bread and shoved some in her mouth. It was tough, but at least this way she could be quiet for a while.

“Did anything happen with Pabst?”

Her heart was beating so loudly that she could hear it. Ora, too, might have been able to, but she turned away and shoved more bread into her mouth before she'd even swallowed the first piece.

“Oh, is this about a new trade?”

Beltra was a master of housework, but was strangely slow when it came to other things. Then again, she seemed to be probing this time, rather than asking, so Fleur ignored her and drank some ale.

“It's a basic principle of trading..”

Ora spoke up just as Fleur stood up.

“..To not get too close to your customers.”

Her heart suddenly calmed, and she glared at him coldly for the accusation. Yet he didn't back down.

“For trades to go smoothly, you must have several partners. That's crucial given the risky and fickle nature of trading. In order to prevent catastrophic loss you must avoid placing your trust in only one partner. Should the agreed-upon goods not be delivered..”

They stared at each other in silence for a while, but Fleur wasn't as good at this as Ora. Not even a muscle on his face did twitch, so ultimately she turned away and barked at Beltra instead.

“Another bowl!”

“Those who want profit must learn the associated dangers. To dream of riches, you must also accept the nightmares. Us peddlers need to be more level-headed and avoid the risks.”

Ora spoke flatly, with no emphasis whatsoever. He had probably ascertained why Fleur was behaving so strangely.

“He's honest.”

“Merchants wear many masks.”

“He *seems* honest.”

Ora nodded, urging her continue.

“The profit's steady. I supply the funds and he buys the clothes. It's 30 to 40 percent profit. We split it halfway.”

“About the clothes.. Where will he buy them, from whom?”

“I hear that it's a famous overseas town, and he'll buy them through Jones company. Don't worry.”

She cut her fish in two, and ate the smaller piece. Conveniently for her, it had already been deboned.

“And who are the buyers?”

“His existing customers. We have it covered.”

The grizzled old merchant ended his questioning. Fleur peeked at him cautiously, like a student

seeking her tutor's appraisal. His hand went up to his head, and he sighed as he rubbed its smooth surface. That was his thinking pose.

Fleur thought back to her conversion with Milton. She was sure they had planned it out sufficiently in advance. The only deviation from Milton's usual strategy was that Fleur would be supplying the funds this time, not the company. When the company paid, they would take most of the profit, but if Fleur paid then the two of them could put their heads together and earn substantially more.

With their aims spelled out so clearly, there shouldn't be any problems.

“Is that all?”

“Is there a problem?”

She replied with an even stronger tone.

“If you're asking for my opinion..”

“Just out with it, say what you wish.”

She looked away immediately after her mouth closed, realizing how rudely she was acting.

“Sorry about that. I really do want to know if you think there are any problems, so please tell me?”

Ora sighed in response, wiping the ale-froth from his beard.

“Can he be trusted?”

Fleur didn't snap at him, but it wasn't to compensate for her behavior. She'd simply considered that point well before he mentioned it, because it concerned her just as much. As Ora said, only the greatest merchants were able to determine the truth from scraps of information.

“Is he that suspicious?”

“It's not that, this just seems too good to be true.”

“Why's that?”

Ora stared at his palm in response, before raising one eye to study her. That was his hesitating pose. He watched her as the wheels of his mind turned, then sighed. That was how his deliberations usually ended.

“Forgive me, milady.”

“For what?”

“Trading is like that large bowl.”

He pointed at the large bowl still half-full with Beltra's delicious soup.

“In it lies the profit that comes from Beltra's skillful hands. If a merchant has equally skillful hands he might earn more from it, but if there's too much inside, some of it will spill. There are limits to how profitable a trade can be.”

Beltra took a seat next to Ora and began eating, clearly disinterested in anything outside of housework.

“In essence there has to be risk equal to the profit being made.”

“I realize that. Milton is putting the risk on me, to avoid being exploited by the company.”

Ora nodded, but didn't stop.

“Meaning they will earn all that much less from Pabst this time. You didn't overlook that, did you? Companies are surprisingly cunning and shady.”

“Huh?”

She was taken aback for a moment, but soon smiled.

“If that's it, don't worry. It's quite the opposite.”

“How so?”

“You see, it's because they're also doing this to increase their profits. He sells clothing through Jones, who want his skills working for them. So he suggested to them that this time he'd find someone to fund the trade and lessen their risk.”

Ora's eyelids calmly and slowly lowered. When they reopened, he looked away.

“Then you'll be dealing through Jones, yes?”

“Yes. He'll get the clothes through them, and so they'll be selling more clothes to him, and improving their relationship as a result. There's no harm to them. Of course..”

She paused for dramatic effect, proud that she could pull it off in front of Ora so smoothly.

“It's even better for Milton and I.”

It was perfect. Milton would be free of his exploiters, and earn more in spite of splitting the profits. That's what Jones was planning. Fleur would shoulder the risk, but earn equivalent profit for it. And the more she earned, the more she learned about the trade, while Milton would eventually be able to save up enough capital to open his own storefront.

“Hmm..”

But surprisingly, Ora didn't seem convinced. He was frowning and staring at his spoon. Fleur closed her eyes and waited patiently for his reply. The time seemed to pass slower and slower, until she couldn't take it anymore and took a sip of her soup. It was cold, but that just made the taste come out more clearly.

“So delicious..”

Beltra smiled in response, having been quietly eating it herself. It wasn't until Fleur requested a little more that Ora finally spoke out.

“Alright. If this is what you've decided.”

Fleur was confused, even when he repeated himself. She just wasn't used to hearing him say “we'll do it your way.” She set her spoon down and looked at him a bit doubtfully.

“If you have any doubts, please share them..”

“No, they won't be solved with words alone. I think I'm worrying too much. I'm old and set in my ways, perhaps too careful because I've been burned in the past. But you..”

He drank some soup, then craned his neck toward Beltra to praise her directly. He was old, but handsome for his age, even taking care to keep his hair smooth with egg whites. His praise put a gentle smile on her face.

“You'll grow in your own way. I can't be chopping your legs off at the knees just because I'm fearful.”

Fleur had no idea if that was some attempt to praise her, but it was progress nonetheless that he was letting her make the decision herself. As an apprentice, it meant that she had won a little of her master's trust.

“A merchant can only truly be independent if they've been burned themselves.”

Fleur smiled.

“Meaning I have yet to experience failure.”

“I didn't say that.”

And yet he was smiling. At length Beltra stood up, realizing that their mugs were empty.

“I've no skill with words, nor any to solve such complicated problems. But I know my own duties.”

She was taking things just as seriously. Nothing was finer than being part of such a family.

~~~

Fleur woke up early the next morning. Well, early by the standards of nobility, not common folk. In the past Beltra would only wake her up after she'd finished her first round of housework. Regardless, Ora was probably the first to wake.

Leaving bed, she tidied her hair with the wooden comb Beltra had crafted for her. It wasn't until she pulled the comb over her shoulder that she remembered her hair wasn't long anymore. It was her first morning after cutting off that symbol of nobility. It cut down her grooming time considerably, it just blew by today.

The long, luxurious hair of a noble was nothing but trouble for a regular person. It took a lot of daily effort to keep it tidy. But regular folks didn't have that kind of time. And since it wouldn't do to betray her gender while trading, Fleur cut it short without hesitation.

Amazingly, she was far from the most surprised by the deed. Others seemed quite taken aback; Beltra resisted furiously when Ora sadly told her that she needed to cut it short, and by the time they'd finished arguing Fleur had cut it on her own. She could still remember Beltra's cry after that, and it would be difficult for her to forget the look of shock on Ora's face.

But Fleur didn't feel any regret when she looked in the mirror. In fact, she smiled at her reflection - her first smile after cutting her hair. She couldn't keep up appearances as a noble if she was going to be a merchant. She had to survive by her own hands, as Fleur Boland.

“Alright!”

There was always a line of people in front of the well in the morning, so Fleur had prepared some water the previous night to wash herself. She then smoothly poured the water out into the garden, like it was second nature.

“Milady?”

Beltra's voice rang after a light knock at the door. It made sense for her to check up on Fleur; it was difficult to rouse her even if she was shaken by her shoulders. Today, she opened her door with a smile.

“Good morning.”

“G-good morning..”

“Where's Ora?”

“Uh, well he's gone to the market as usual.”

It was so early that Ora wasn't even back yet to boss her around. She could finally act on her own volition.

“Then, would you prepare breakfast for me? I'd like a slice of cheese in bread, and a little wine.”

Breakfast was a luxury - the special right of a noble and rich family. It was a symbolic kind of pain for a fallen noble to lose their breakfast privileges. Beltra reacted with surprise, then stared at the floor lost in thought before looking up. Ultimately, she smiled and nodded.

“Please wait for a while.”

So she was rewarding Fleur for getting up so early? In response, Fleur gave her a hug. Beltra laughed, then sped off to make her breakfast.

The birds were singing outside; a fresh morning had begun.

~~~

After Fleur ate her secretive breakfast (something Ora could *not* learn about), she put on her coat, covered her face with a scarf, and prepared to leave.

“Oh, you're leaving so early?”

Beltra seemed surprised as she dried her hands on her apron.

“Yes, I'm going to the port. Just tell that to Ora.”

“Oh.. alright..”

Beltra replied uncertainly, and when Fleur looked back at her silently, nervously continued.

“I just can't seem to get used to seeing you in those clothes.”

Fleur didn't care about that, so she just tidied her coat a bit and intentionally answered in a man's voice.

“Farewell!”

“Take care..”

Fleur felt like laughing at Beltra's nervousness, but it really did suit her character. As she walked outside, she couldn't help but feel happy in the morning air. After such a cold and dry winter, it was finally warming up. The air smelled fresh, like a forest. The buildings and trees were slowly getting busier under the brighter sun, as if compelled by the nice weather. It was spring, and flowers were blossoming. A green summer seemed inevitable.

Fleur made her way past several goat-tending merchants, and noticed herself speeding up to meet with a certain someone at the unloading zone of the port. After walking down several streets, she finally arrived and saw the many boats blocking up the port. Dock workers were working hard to unload the goods on those boats as quickly as possible.

Most of the dock workers rose before the sun came up.. indeed, before the church bell rang for morning mass. Working times for the market in town were strictly regulated, but not for the port. After all, no one could refuse a boat's entry into port, not when they'd braved storm and rain and came back battered after nearly being sunk.

But that was just how merchants liked to view it; perhaps it was true, but it could also just be a myth. Still, the market certainly wouldn't open just because a weary horse was transferring goods from the port to the market.

“Alright, you're all loaded! May the gods go with you!”

A shirtless dock worker shouted out after landing on a wagon, but his voice was quickly drowned out in the din. Once the sun rose, any merchant could ship his goods no matter his age.

This time of day was the busiest for travelers as well. The various companies' loading docks were crammed with wagons, as well as staff ferrying goods around, merchants inventorying stock, and beggars grabbing the salt that spilled onto the ground from barrels of pickled herrings.

It was every inch a crowded port. You'd want to leave this noise the instant your cart was loaded.. and yet, strangely, you'd end up missing the noise later. It was an odd situation that took effort to adapt to. Fleur didn't expect to ever adjust as well as Ora had, but she needed to at least learn to remain calm in such environments.

“Is that the last batch? How many? Twenty? No problem! Load 'em on!”

Fleur soon spotted a young man in the crowd, directing everyone on where to place their cargo. He wore fine clothes among all the strong-looking shirtless men around him, making him look rather oddly like a poet on a battlefield.

“Alright, I'm off! We'll meet up at that hill! May the gods go with you!”

In this atmosphere, it probably took all a man had to relay directions. That young man seemed to be giving it his all. Fleur watched in interest as she walked over to him. He seemed about ready to set his horse running, until he noticed her.

“Ah..”

“Good morning.”

She hesitated on whether to greet him more politely, and settled on doing so. Milton glanced over at his goods, then back at her, then smiled.

“Hello.”

“I seem lucky to have caught you.”

“Haha.. I didn't expect you would visit today.”

He laughed, and some white breath also left Fleur's mouth, dissipating in the cool morning air. Milton then moved behind the horse and urged it forward with a gentle smack.

“Shall we walk and talk?”

“Let's.”

She began walking beside him, thinking about the different kinds of nobles in the world. Some lived in noisy, crowded towns. Others in monasteries in far-flung plains. Milton was currently heading out to visit a family that owned a large forest estate with a river.

Fleur hadn't slept well the past few days, but she still looked sharp. Not one hint of exhaustion was visible on her face. She yawned not even once as they strode through the crowds of people. She simply breathed in under her scarf, quietly and deeply, to keep herself calm. She had appearances to maintain.

“Right, so what we talked about yesterday..”

She finally began talking after they had left the port and were making their way past the various inns and vintners' shops in the business district. But her voice trailed off. It wasn't because anyone urged her to stop, but rather because Milton smiled at her as he pulled his horse along.

“I-is something amusing?”

If she didn't lower her voice, she would have indeed been the butt of jokes. Or was he laughing

at something else?

“Ah, my apologies.”

He covered his mouth. But she couldn't bring herself to get angry at someone smiling so happily. It was the kind of smile that was contagious. It was just too fine a morning to get upset at someone like that.

“It's just incredible, that's all.”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled again in embarrassment as she shot back. She wasn't looking at him, but nor was she upset. They were business partners, and she wanted to hear his advice.

“Oh, just that if this were a year or two ago.. heck, even just a little while ago.. if you spoke to me in that voice I wouldn't be able to hold back my laughter.”

Their voices were drowned out by the sound of the horses' hooves. She closed her eyes, wondering how his matter-of-fact reply wasn't making her angry. Maybe, as he said, she had changed as well in recent times.

“Of course, that's not to say that I'll be able to hold it in much longer.”

He grinned, but because he was only joking around she couldn't help but smile in response.

“Ah, sorry, I'll stop joking around. So you've considered my offer, have you?”

The closer they got to the market, the more travelers passed them by. Apprentices were preparing for their work at the many smithies and crafts-houses they walked past, and the bakers were obviously busy (if the smell of baking bread was any indication).

“I accept.”

Her reply was succinct. She said it purposely as they attentively eyed the bakery they were passing, then stared at him. He turned to her in surprise.

“Really?”

“I wouldn't lie to you.”

She realized that right now she was dressed like a merchant, and breathing intently under her scarf. It made her feel guilty to see his happy reaction, and in that instant she suddenly learned what “shining eyes” looked like.

“Thank you.. thank you very much!”

He breathed in deeply between his words.

“Um.. haha.”

She replied awkwardly, in a voice so weak she herself could barely hear it. Ora's image popped into her mind, reminding her to not take him at face value. And Ora was always right.

“I stayed up all night thinking it over, and decided to accept your proposal.”

“Oh, uh.. my thanks, really.”

“..”

She watched him smile, doing her best to hide her concerns and calm herself as they walked on.

“That said, is there really nothing we have to worry about? Buying or selling?”

“Hmm, well I believe the company who introduced us really wants to cooperate with us.”

Ora's faced popped back into her mind, urging her to question him a little more.

“So they're trustworthy? You don't think they're just doing this to mess with the other companies?”

“Well, that's always possible of course. But I think of it this way: clothes are light, and a boat can carry a great deal of them. And, the more we ship out at once, the lower our costs. But of course, it's all for naught if we can't sell all of them. But even so, we can still sell them at a lower price, since it won't hurt as much if we buy them in large quantities in the first place. Our chance to profit is that much greater. And Jones' aim is to become the largest company in town. Have you ever been disparaged, by any chance?”

He smiled at her as he asked in a bitter tone. Evidently, they hadn't treated him kindly when he first made his proposal to them. It seemed she'd misunderstood him, judging him to be a merchant only interested in profits. He carried on.

“Everyone in the world is suspicious.”

Fleur, a former noble who wasn't experienced with worldly affairs, was intrigued by this.

“Everyone only thinks of their own profits. Of course, I'm no different.”

“Then..”

She stopped herself from finishing with, ".why should I trust you?" It would have been childish to ask such a question. She'd just look like a kid trying to debate him for fun. Thankfully, she had managed to spare herself that embarrassment.

And yet, oddly, she wasn't sure if she should have stopped herself. When she spoke like a child, she felt something well up inside her. But for now, she just hid all those doubts behind her scarf and quietly studied his face. It was a gentle face, which now spoke gently.

"It might be comical to hear me say that, but it's all I can say."

They had arrived at the edge of town, so Milton stopped and continued.

"Please, at least trust what I said."

She smiled while squinting slightly, no longer sure what she was seeing in front of her.

They were coming up to the toll booth outside town, where many farmers were transferring their crops. Many travelers were there too, also having to pay their share of taxes and pass inspection. There were oxen, horses, chickens, ducks, and humans.. a mess the likes of which wasn't matched elsewhere. But Fleur wasn't listening to all of that noise.

"You're hardly being convincing."

"Of course, you never remembered my face."

She laughed under her scarf, thinking that being a fallen noble might not be so bad after all.

"Attack, retreat, and then attack again.."

"And see if you catch a butterfly, cat, rabbit, or fox."

It was a phrase from a short poem that a young noble had written, in love with satire. She and Milton were possibly the only people in town who'd heard it, and so they laughed merrily as they stood together. As that laughter subsided like ripples on a quiet lake, Fleur gently replied.

"I'll trust you."

It was a concise statement, yet far more powerful than the long contracts normally drawn up by merchants. Milton nodded gravely, and set down the horses' reins.

"Then I'll be counting on you."

She replied as they shook hands.

"That's my line."

With that he took the reins once again and shot a glance at his horse, but turned to her once more.

“If I may, I'd like to end today's conversation with that, alright?”

He looked at her with a serious expression, though it was more aptly described as mock-seriousness.

“You're a better speaker than I expected.”

“The key to whether or not one's words truly reach the listener's heart comes at the moment of parting.”

“To act as though you are interested in someone, so she'll be thinking of naught but you the entire night.. is that what you mean?”

Even Fleur was surprised to hear herself saying that so naturally. It was utterly refreshing to wear the now-rusted mask of aristocracy that she'd sealed deep in her heart for such a long time.

“It appears I'm unfit to be a merchant, having my thoughts reads like that by another.”

“Is that so? And I hadn't yet even asked for the time we would next meet.”

Playing the part of a noble maiden waiting for her knight's next visit, her heart yearning so much that a day felt like three autumns - it felt quite pleasant to play that role.

“Three nights hence, in the evening.”

“I shall be waiting for you.”

She gestured to him almost unconsciously, wondering if the noble blood flowing in her veins had compelled her to do it. She hadn't even been able to avoid tilting her chin up slightly. She immediately attempted to conceal it by lowering her chin and gently averting her eyes.

“Farewell.”

He rode off with that, though she was fully aware that he had pretended not to notice her reaction. The sound of his horse trotting away gradually melted into the distance.

Three nights hence, in the evening. She murmured this to herself as she watched his back receding, suddenly realizing that her hands had been pressed up against her chest. She immediately withdrew those tightly-clutched hands and smoothed the wrinkles they had formed on her clothes.

Milton greeted the soldiers at the inspection post, and made it through successfully. He only turned back to look at her once. She turned and walked off when he did, to leave the impression that she'd already long forgotten about him. Of course in truth she was afraid to keep staring at his back.

Three nights hence, in the evening. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the town that had sprung to life around her, Fleur murmured those words in her heart as if holding dearly onto a treasure.

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The clear and bright springtime sunlight was beating down. But it was common for the buildings in a town to be so tightly packed together that not even a piece of paper would fit between them.

It might seem natural for sunlight to creep into every home, but in reality that could actually be considered a luxury. And when even sunlight - that inexhaustible radiance from the heavens - could be considered a luxury, it was easy to see how tough it was to live the life of a commoner.

These kinds of thoughts swam in her head as she leaned against the window frame, her cheek resting in her palm, watching small birds gather around the breadcrumbs from lunch.

“Milady.”

What a poorly-timed utterance. And yet she couldn't get angry, and could only continue staring out the window absent-mindedly. By all rights, Ora was the one who *should* be angry.

“Milady!”

The birds flew off in a panic. That was finally enough to make Fleur lift her head up and leisurely turn it to the source of her agitation.

“Why must you be so loud..”

“If that's what it takes to get you to listen to me, then I'll shout even louder!”

“Alright, alright.. it's just such a lovely day..”

She yawned as she exhaled her last word, stretching mightily in her chair. The table in front of her had some papers, a quill, and an inkwell strewn upon it. The paper nearest to her was covered in words written in a smooth hand.

It listed the common set-phrases used for contracts between merchants, as Ora had written them: words such as "purchase", "sale", "loan", "lending", and even prayerful lines that often ended on such documents. Merchants often engaged in deals with foreigners, so they tended

to use common phrases for convenience in their profession.

Fine details aside, one could not afford to misread a single word or line in a contract, especially ones involving sums of money large enough to result in bankruptcy. One had to be well aware of the traps that opportunists used to prey on the dull-witted; these were the basics of the game, so to speak.

As Fleur ruminated on Ora's exaggerated-feeling lesson, she flipped over the next sheet of paper. On it was a large table of currencies, and their exchange rates. To Fleur it might as well have been a complicated spell incantation.

Of course one wishing to gain their independence as a merchant needed to memorize these rates fully, and Fleur knew she would have to do so even if Ora wasn't urging her.

“Milady.”

His voice had gone flat; he had seriously lost his patience. She shot him a frown.

“Oh, don't be so upset.. I too hate that I am like this.”

He was a keen observer, so he naturally realized that she wasn't talking about her laziness in the face of fine weather. The wrinkles on his brow scrunched up as he opened just one eye to study her.

He was carefully choosing his next words; a clever and loyal man, who didn't abandon Fleur despite her hopeless demeanor and behavior in front of him. He even responded courteously.

“Milady, as your bookkeeper and mentor, I must be frank.”

“Hmm?”

He breathed in deeply at her short reply.

“Don't mistake the truth.”

What farcical dialogue. Fleur hated such pretentious musings. Merchants seemed born to be vague, saying things that could be interpreted in many ways. Her smile darkened upon hearing him, which was just what he expected. He touched his head and continued.

“I shouldn't speak ill of him, but the lord of the Pabst family succeeded his predecessor by attracting his wife. I've heard that everything is handled by the women of that family. And so..”

“And so Milton, who inherited that blood, also inherited that dependence on women?”

She stared at the walls after finishing his sentence. In the silence that followed, only birdsong

was heard; perhaps those same birds had returned to sing their childlike songs. Then, that wise bookkeeper's sigh joined them.

“Yes, I know that he is Milton Pabst, a merchant that trades with blue blood, and that I am just a girl.”

“That's not what I meant..”

“There is no need to explain, for I understand. I'm aware of the truth. I'm a bird with no other place to land. If I leap from this windowsill, I must forever remain flying.”

She squinted darkly at the garden as she spoke. Ora opened his mouth as if to speak, but ultimately said nothing. His former master was her ex-husband. He had borne witness to their union, and felt even worse about it than Fleur did.

And so, as the Boland family fell, he helped her when she had nowhere else to go. She was his redemption: the pathetic daughter of a noble who had been forced into a marriage only describable as loveless.

But he was determined not to give up. That's how strongly he felt, and perhaps that was enough to justify his actions. This was all her conjecture, of course, but it was likely the truth in spite of being awful. And so she turned back, with a look as though mocking herself.

“So, in business, a person changes their tune the moment profit is involved, is that right?”

The wizened old man sat silently with a serious look on his face, and eventually nodded.

“And talk is far too cheap.. that's why we need contracts.”

“To be proper merchant?”

In an effort to put him at ease, she smiled as naturally as she could. When his expression finally melted into something more comfortable, she coughed softly and stretched. There were a lot of things left for her to memorize.

“Alright, then I'll get to this. I'll do my best, so have some faith in me and let me learn at my own pace, please?”

Ora sat for a while before opting to leave her alone. She finally smiled as she watched him quietly close the door. The people around her were so kind. She felt she had to make sure their investment paid dividends.

She scratched her nose, shrugging at her ambition, then picked up the pen, no longer distracted.

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For her to trust a man's word that he would return in three days would be like a third-rate poem. She knew better that business wouldn't go that smoothly.

On the fourth evening Fleur received a letter from Milton. The business meeting was delayed. But Fleur didn't mind; Ora was keeping her busy. She was also talking to the Jones company - who had introduced her to Milton - about purchasing licorice.

Ora was filling her mornings and evenings with study about clothes. From the spinning of wool into thread to weaving linen, she was learning everything involved. Yet no matter if it was raw materials, wool, of dye from some distant land she'd never heard of, this was all new to her. After two days she was already forgetting everything.

For instance, wool wasn't spun where sheep were raised.. let alone where it was dyed or woven. After learning all of that, she no longer remembered the names of the cities where the clothes were made, nor where sales were strong. Ora knew so much that Fleur wondered if her brain was too small and was already full.

She even shared these concerns with one of her friendlier colleagues on her business route - rather oddly, the same man who had threatened to underpay her. He called himself Hans, and actually empathized with her.

"I feel the same way."

Fleur couldn't believe it.

"Really?"

"Of course, there's just too much to remember. I sometimes feel I'll push out my own name if I try to force anything else into my brain."

Hans, who smelled of herring and musty grass, who nearly undercut her, was agreeing with her. She was beside herself.

"But hey.. you've got nothing to complain about. You've got an excellent mentor, and noble blood. Most apprentices get lashed by their teachers, or worse, rolling pins if they're training to become bakers."

"Oh.. then Ora's that kind after all? I thought he was joking when he told me that."

She smiled, revealing her disbelief. Hans simply rolled up his sleeves.

"This one's from a lash, from when I was learning to write on stone tablets. My arm was covered in dust, but the lash blew it all away. And this one.."

He pointed at his left wrist, which had a different scar.

“This one's from trying to keep myself awake by burning myself with a candle.”

He was sharing these painful memories like they were nothing. He looked at her calmly, with a face full of sympathy. Nobles weren't taught how hard commoners had to work from the day they were born. But Fleur was now learning it first-hand.

His earlier attitude toward her made a bit more sense now. Before her was someone who'd led a hard life, and yet if she was still a noble she would have laughed at his efforts.

“There were other, cleverer apprentices where I was training, so I felt I couldn't afford to lose out to them. Now I can be proud that I've succeeded after working so hard. By contrast..”

He suddenly stopped talking and laughed at himself.

“Jeez, listen to me going on and on.”

It was obvious what he was going to say. Those who work hard won, those who didn't would fail even if they were clever. Merchants were confident, so they had no respect for nobles. They even joked about kings.

Back when Fleur was still a noble, she always looked at merchants as fearless. She wondered if they simply had nothing worth protecting.

“We're no good when it comes to talking to priests.”

Fleur felt compelled to question Hans about merchants. He thought for a while before revealing an expression of uncertainty. Perhaps he wasn't as bad as her first impression.

“We're like their opposites. Merchants only try to fulfill their desires.”

“I suspect it's because priests also can't give up their desire to find salvation and spread it to others.”

She repeated Ora's words without thinking about it. The look of surprise on Hans' face was unexpected. She'd just shared her own feelings during their conversation. He seemed curious, and looked at her while stroking his chin.

That merchantly gesture, which previously seemed so arrogant and rude to Fleur, suddenly seemed a bit more endearing.

“That may be true. Well, perhaps it's disrespectful to say this, but we might be more similar to priests than we think. Priests make it their goal to seek out a world without illness or death,

whereas we seek out a world without loss or bankruptcy.”

After his cheerful speech he murmured to himself, “That would truly be paradise.”

Merchants always fought for profit, and schemed of any means to do so. They trusted no one, and even if they trusted someone they could still cheat them. It was all for profit. Titles, even noble or kingly, meant nothing to them. To become successful, a merchant had to overcome lashings, blood and rain. By comparison, nobility was born with everything.

“May I ask you something?”

She turned to Hans. They'd known each other long enough that hiding her identity from him wasn't necessary, so she pulled off her scarf. He had no idea what she would ask, but he replied with a gentle expression that threw her off-guard.

“Go ahead.”

“What is it you're fighting for?”

She'd already guessed the answer, but she wasn't so cocky as to believe that a former noble like her would guess correctly. In fact she was hoping he would reveal a reason she'd never considered. Perhaps another real merchant could still surprise her.

“Haha, that's your big question?”

“It's a strange one, is it?”

She smiled apologetically - a reflexive gesture for nobles who attended balls.

“Well, no.. I understand why you'd ask. I've actually wanted to ask the owner the same thing. After all, I'm just one man, and just barely able to feed myself and my family. So I really don't know how to answer you.”

Apparently Hans hadn't found his own answer yet. She'd probably always remember his name and face, unless she found someone else even more eager to drive prices so brutally. Exceptionally greedy, yet somehow modest. Merchants were truly strange.

“I was born to poor farmers who were never really sure if they would have a next meal. I was their fourth son, so I count myself lucky to have survived until now. I left home, not knowing where to go, and having nowhere to go. This company kept and raised me, so it's the only place I have. That said, there aren't many who can survive this lifestyle.”

He explained himself in embarrassment, covering up his anxiety by rubbing his nose. It was an endearingly boyish gesture. A man who was used to laughing at people for missing their homes was now struck with the same melancholy.

“In other words, I could give you a lot of advice for how to survive this long, but I don't know if any of it will be of any use. I only know that it helped me make it, so maybe it'll be worthwhile, but..”

Despite struggling with this issue himself, Hans seemed happy to talk about it. He stared off into the distance and became quiet, and Fleur turned her eyes down to her hands. She was smiling, being familiar with the kind of expression he was wearing. His silence was proof that her guess was right.

She didn't have much love for her ex-husband, but had a grudging respect for him. Anytime he saw an opportunity, he gave up whatever he needed to grasp it - honor, beliefs, friendships, even relatives and love. But what did such people seek?

She also wanted to see what their eyes saw.. even just once. Whatever goal it was they were fighting toward seemed impressive enough that Fleur had begun to hate her husband less and less. And in the end, when he declared bankruptcy that thing had vanished from his eyes.. but what was it?

People were fighting through so much pain and misery for it, and even Hans had gone through a lot in his own fight to grasp it.

“I can't really describe what it is.”

He snapped out of his meditation and spoke, pulling Fleur back from her thoughts as well.

“But I think it's something like an expectation.”

“An expectation?”

He smiled and shook his head at her query.

“I don't know.. I'm just too young to answer that question.”

His honesty was enough to show how difficult the question was. It wasn't the kind of virtue that a knight would fight for. And as a fallen noble, Fleur had no choice but to acknowledge her respect.

“I apologize; I shouldn't be asking you such odd questions.”

He recovered his composure and squinted.

“Don't worry about it.”

It felt like they had grown a bit closer, and to top it off Fleur had an answer for the question

she had always had.

“Thank you.”

Merchants could be honest and humble, even when they were greedier than any other person.

After their discussion, Fleur finally spoke with him about the hay trade. But her mind was elsewhere. Hans didn't necessarily care about their conversation. He may have only opened up to her because she also traded in hay, and could help him out with the latest information on what villages had the best hay, and how to best approach their elders.

In the past, she would have hated this “act friendly to get information” game, but not anymore. Merchants were running after those who were born with everything because they had their own goals, and wouldn't stop fighting even if beaten with whips or sticks. Of course they would be nicer to those who could help them.

She walked back to town from the port, cash in hand after a busy day. Milton seemed exhausted; it was written on his face even if he tried to keep his spirits high as they walked together. Still, Fleur was now only thinking about how to make the most money possible through their mutual cooperation.

Milton had told her that he was fighting so hard because he wanted to stick it to the family that disowned him. But that surely wasn't enough to make him force such a smile on his face right now.. he was just like Hans, and had his own expectation that there would be something at the end of his business path.

If this was really Milton's attitude, then Fleur need neither greet nor speak words of consolation to him now. She stood before the fatigue-ridden Milton, who was on the verge of collapsing onto the bed and into unconsciousness.

“I wish to have a discussion with you about the purchase of clothing.”

It was a slow change, but as he heard those words from Fleur, his initial look of surprise was gradually replaced with an invincible smile.

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They were in her home, and Beltra was there, but she knew how to read the atmosphere well enough to hear the mice in the dens. They didn't have to worry about her listening in, nor about Ora, who was standing guard outside. And so, Fleur removed her scarf, feeling secure in her place of power.

“I went to a company to sell them clothes, and we ended up negotiating.”

“So it's their first time dealing with you?”

“Yeah, so I couldn't negotiate for much.”

“Is that why you were late?”

He smiled at her question.

“Right. And they're the only ones I could see today. If I overdo it, I might lose customers. But I also sold them as much as I could, so unless they suddenly get fat they won't need any more clothing from me.”

He'd left with twenty aprons, and if it was a normal-sized company they probably bought more than they needed. He'd probably talked them into it, which only showed how strong his sales skills were: trades with new customers had to be fair.

“So the worst aspect of selling clothes is doing your best to not take a loss?”

He brought his hand up to his chin, which seemed rather dry compared to a week ago.. maybe it was the stubble that made it seem that way.

“That's basically it. When I started..”

“Hmm?”

He looked up as she urged him. Something squealed from the rafters, probably a mouse.

“When I started I was just as determined to work hard. But if I had the choice, I'd really rather not.”

He didn't turn to face her, but rather watched the mouse scurry around. What was he implying? She tried to remain calm while he thought it over.. she really didn't want him to guess what she was thinking. Was he talking about changing strategies to something less demanding, or just comparing himself to the mouse?

“And there's still someone else we have to worry about.”

“Huh?”

She stammered in surprise. Ora had warned her to stay silent and contemplate what was said when she didn't know how to reply, but this time she couldn't help it. But it was easy to blurt out like that when someone intentionally changed the topic on you. His smile betrayed that he was laughing at her, but as he continued it became clear that she wasn't the only one.

“My creditors.”

“Creditors?”

She wasn't asking him what that meant; she was intimately familiar with the meaning.

“Indeed. The ones who discovered my talents. But they've never put themselves in my shoes, and I had to rely on another to sponsor my living expenses, lucky for me. I can't say I'm grateful to them.”

Fleur soon realized the meaning behind his little riddle. His mouth twisted into the same one a devil-may-care mercenary would wear.

“We should take work seriously, but we can only work in the daytime. We need the night to rest. God himself has set that truth for us, and yet here we are, working day and night and even through festivals and celebrations. It never ends. Only someone who makes a deal with the Devil can keep that sort of effort up.”

It was a pretty famous sentiment, and Fleur knew where it lead.

“That Devil's name is usury.”

Milton must have been granted a large loan, and was still repaying it. Of course, merchant's greed being what it was, they would have set a short loan period with an extreme rate of interest.

Fleur's own husband had applied for loans daily to cover their shortfalls, until one day he could only take one from a usury lender. They demanded to be repaid seven-fold within half a year, wanting to make the largest profit they could. And so they issued such an interest rate, which was tighter than the collar around a hound's neck.

It was a common story, so Fleur turned her eyes empathetically toward Milton. She was surprised to see him already calm, having recited that famous quote. His tough and honest eyes made it clear that he intended to bounce back, and everything would be alright. That he would protect her as well if he had to.

She had no idea what to say at a time like this; Milton had been left with no choice but to ask her for another loan.

“But what if..”

She stopped nervously mid-sentence, making him lower his gaze gently and urge her to continue.

“What if..?”

“What if I were to ask you for interest as well? What would you do?”

Even those who weren't in the world of business knew that money was power. Fleur might be a freeman from the nobility, but even if she had Beltra and Ora she wasn't pathetic. She'd taken money from her husband's purse as vengeance.

Milton could earn much more than she could, but if it came down purely to money she had the advantage. He looked up and slowly replied.

“I knew you were gentle the first time we met.”

“..”

She was doing her best to remain calm, but faltered. Her face had betrayed her, and it didn't help that she cast her eyes downward. But she wanted to look at something else. She coughed.

“B-but people always change when interest is involved. You know that.”

She'd learned that from Ora, and in this situation it was all she could do to repeat his words; if she spoke her own mind right now she would choke up.

“Of course they do. But even then you can always tell their true character. And..”

He smiled.

“You'd never charge interest. I could be sure of that, even if you were wearing your scarf right now.”

He didn't ever seem to take her seriously as a merchant, only as the daughter of nobility. Normally she would have been furious, but right now her emotions were a mess. She felt like crying, and yet she felt happy. And so, she surrendered.

“I.. can pass on interest. But the profits will be split evenly. We've promised that much.”

She said this simply to save face.

“We're merchants, so of course we treasure promises..”

His face became worried.

“..But we haven't yet signed any contracts.”

He meant of course that she still had time to change her mind and stipulate terms of interest. It seemed that he, too, was being destroyed by this restless atmosphere.

She shook her head, but his expression didn't change. He simply leaned back in his chair. It didn't seem to be an act, and it was the first time Fleur had seen him so nervous.

“Then, let's be specific.”

He finally spoke up when they'd both fallen silent.. just as one might expect of an expelled noble. Before the war could end, he would begin another battle.

“I think I can trust you completely.”

A perfect line. In fact, perfect enough to comfort Fleur. It reduced the issue to one of buying and selling.

“Then let's discuss the types and quantities of clothing we should purchase.”

“Let's.”

She nodded, and replied succinctly.

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It was supertime, and once again Fleur, Beltra and Ora seated themselves at the table.

Fleur had insisted on Milton's presence, but he declined. But she knew he'd been selling clothes for the past four days, and had only come to her to discuss the terms of their contract. Surely, rest was more appropriate for him than supper.

She was speaking with Ora about her conversation with Milton as he pondered what to make of it.

“Hmm.”

He sighed the moment she finished. Perhaps it was his age showing, but he closed his eyes and leaned back before sighing even more deeply. It made her nervous, but he hadn't yet frowned so she didn't think it was *that* bad.

“Well, that's Milton for you. He's as good as I've heard.”

His appreciative reply took her by surprise.

“That good?”

“Yes. Not just good, but really good. Nobles' minds change all the time, but their standards never do. It is currently in fashion to use frills and thin materials, and he even knows what's in style so far away. I'm impressed. Now all that's in question is his salesmanship.”

“I've looked into that.”

She replied with a bitter smile, and Ora coughed with a serious look on his face. She shot him another question.

“And the contract? Do you see any problems?”

Fleur was the one who composed the first draft of the contract, and Ora had checked it over. He never missed a flaw or questionable passage. He changed her version substantially.

It wasn't just her terminology, but the phrasing that changed. Some sentences became quite unnatural. The experience reminded her of her childhood vocabulary lessons.

Ora had no tolerance for flowery language, and with every flaw they introduced he asked Beltra for a fresh sheet of paper. As they wrote each new draft, he frowned more and more at the amount of expensive paper they were going through.

“We'll have to be extra careful. If there's any flaw in the contract we'll lose everything we earn.”

He'd lived in the world of business for as long as he could remember. For many decades. What he said had to be true. And yet, there was surely a limit to how careful they had to be, wasn't there?

After all, Milton was the other party of the contract. He wasn't a merchant, and relied heavily on his family's reputation. It would probably wound him to learn that they were writing the contract with such scrutiny. At least, Fleur would be wounded if she were in his place.

Ora seemed to sense her thoughts, and read the contract once more at arm's length.

“Under God, Fleur von Eiterzentel Boland and Milton Pabst, of honesty and virtue, who know each other in trade under God's name, shall purchase wool, linen, and silver finery. By contract, Boland shall supply the funds, half of which shall be counted as a loan to Pabst. Upon sale, profits shall be evenly split. All items purchased with the money shall be under the ownership of Boland. May God watch over us.”

With that, his eyes halted and didn't turn away from the contract. He still seemed to have reservations about the phrasing or terminology, but Fleur guessed what he was going to focus on.

“The amount we're loaning.”

As expected. She grabbed a slice of bread and voiced her protest.

“Half is enough.”

Her short reply sounded determined, but Ora kept staring at the contract, unconvinced. It was a significant flaw with the contract. If they were ultimately forced to sell everything off as cheaply as possible, it was Fleur who would lose the most.

Ora wanted to count the entire amount as a loan to Milton. A greedier merchant would have asked for one-and-a-half times back, or even twice. It was rather heartless, but still within the range the Church would allow. Twenty or thirty percent a year was normal, and trades could last several years.

Yet the profit would be split. Even though half would count as a loan. It was the kind of mercy God would show. Ora had never read a contract like this before in his life. It wasn't just the trust she showed to Milton, but something more vital.

They were losing money, and with it power. By contrast, Milton would only come out stronger. Milton, who had to bow to the wealthy just like Ora and Beltra did. And yet, Fleur had placed herself on the same stage as him, risking herself to help him.

Even Fleur thought it was naive, but this was the only way she could find a partner she could trust. So she explained to Ora that she believed they weren't losing right out of the gate with this decision.. it was alright.

Ora simply glanced at her, then closed his eyes and finally sighed. He seemed to have forced himself to accept her perspective. Her tension finally relaxed, and her smile appeared.

“Then that's all I have to say. I can only pray that things go smoothly.”

Having tidied up the papers, Ora finally reached out to take some of the bread Beltra had baked.

“It's fine, you shouldn't even have to pray.”

With such a specific contract and Milton's skill, they probably didn't even have to rely on God's grace. But as Fleur happily reached her spoon out to sample the soup, Ora coughed loudly.

“Take care. You never know what lies ahead until you've reached the end of a contract. Even if our plans were flawless, they'd never go perfectly. Storms delay shipments, or they're stolen by brigands, and so on.”

It was like he was throwing a bucket of cold water on her. Her smile vanished as she tasted the soup, thinking it over. What he said had to be taken seriously. No matter how good the plan, accidents did happen. But if one only considered the risks, they would never make a move in the first place.

“But this is what we, your servants, are supposed to worry about. You don't have to concern yourself over everything.”

Ora hastily said this, realizing that Fleur wasn't so much eating as she was sipping on her soup. Those words made her unhappy, even if they were true. There was nothing she could do about it but be displeased.

She looked up, and saw Ora's bitter smile as he stared off into space. She'd seen this kind of look before, back when her ex-husband had been Ora's master.

“My former master also liked to change his future plans. Well, it was more like he could see things that I couldn't, and included them in his plans. Every time I would worry unnecessarily. There are two kinds of talent: the kind that opens up new roads, and the kind that follows and builds the roads. They're so very different, and yet Milady..”

He finally looked back at Fleur.

“..is the first kind, I'm certain.”

He was speaking sincerely. It made her set her spoon down and rub her face, laughing in embarrassment.

“It's terribly embarrassing to receive such praise.. but aye, that made me feel better.”

“It's best that you feel this way. It's my job to worry about the smaller details, and Beltra will also watch over you.”

Beltra, who sat off to the side and ate like a proper servant, hadn't betrayed any interest in the conversation the two shared. Her mind only seemed to have space for household chores (that might be because she was now doing the chores of several housekeepers).

But as Ora finished talking, she seemed to snap back to reality. Her red face hung low, perhaps in anger.

“Oops, it's the second worst thing I can do to make Beltra angry.”

Fleur smiled and said while she looked at Beltra, who was surprised.

“Oh, and what's the first?”

Ora was playing along intentionally.

“Make her cry.”

Beltra, who hadn't been paying attention up until now, covered her face and uttered her

response.

“Please stop joking at my expense.”

She really has an adult's toughness, thought Fleur affectionately, as she smiled at Beltra.

“It seems I have nothing to add this time.”

“And yet here you are, as usual.”

The old merchant had nothing to add, and just lifted his hands in a gesture that he was staying out of this.

“I'll be praying for your success.”

The evening sky silently grew darker.

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It was getting darker. Boats were quickly entering and exiting port. Yesterday's fleet, which had come out of nowhere for repair and resupply, were now on their way out.. what a brief stay.

Even the number of people aboard the boats was decreasing, as well as priests praying for their safe voyage. If they missed this chance, they'd have to hold off for another month.

After speaking with Fleur the previous night, Milton hadn't left the Jones company's meeting room. But it wasn't until now that Hans - the one representing the company in this deal - arrived.

Before entering into their contract with the company, Fleur and Milton both had other exchange contracts to settle.

“Will that do?”

It was a lengthy and detailed contract, setting their previous verbal contract in stone. Milton was no greenhorn, and wouldn't need long to confirm its contents.

But nobles wrote their promises on paper as a sign they doubted the credit of others - it was little more than an insult. Fleur hoped the pain she felt in her chest was simply an illusion.

Milton eyed the paper, pretending to not even look at her. She shrugged and waited for his inevitably angry response.. which never came. Instead, he smiled as though he was perfectly comfortable with it.

“Alright, that makes me feel better.”

Fleur had no clue what he meant, so she felt compelled to ask.

“How so?”

“Well, it's not just a verbal contract anymore. I mean I do trust you, Ms. Fleur, but you are the one lending me money worth more than our lives. If we simply kept it a verbal contract..”

He tapped the hilt of his short sword in jest.

“I'd defend your rights with my life, if I were a knight.”

Business relationships were nothing like the ones between nobles and knights. It had to be clear how the responsibility and profit were to be distributed. Otherwise too much trust simply meant you might earn less.

A less scrupulous merchant, trustworthy or not, might not bother with a written contract, but this was business. Knights would honorably pay with their lives, but not merchants.

“Yet I'm still the one who stands to profit the most in this deal. No merchant can feel bad when they're being trusted like this, especially not when the numbers are so encouraging.”

They were still just theoretical numbers, but he felt it necessary to flatter her. Normally people would reply like this as a show of trust, but not in the boardroom of a company. Fleur chose her words carefully.

“An old knight who survived many battles once told me: you can only be the strongest when you cease worrying.”

“And trust can do that.”

Milton briefly scanned the paper before signing his name at the end. The terms of the contract were favorable, but he could incur a debt depending on how things turned out.

“Then let me kill your worries: I will sell all of the clothes.”

The image of her ex-husband came up in her mind. He was always shouting at people to buy and sell things in their home. It no longer seemed like he was just being a cheap man now. His words now took on the sound of a captain barking orders during a battle.

“In that case, we can make our purchases now.”

After Milton signed the contract, Fleur did as well, and rang the desk bell to summon Hans back into the room.

“Thin woolen fabric from Lubic, 22 sheets total, in assorted colors. Hempen fabric with the stamp of the worker's association in Yilin, 20 sheets total. Silver finery from Kwaifoldt, 4-”

Fleur and Hans listened to Milton as he listed the goods they wanted. Fleur’s face was expressionless; it was difficult to read her mood. But Milton didn't really expect her to jump into the conversation.

After all, they were planning on buying from Hans so it should be safe. Hans double-checked the names and numbers of their inventory and matched the colors to their prices. He then rubbed his eyes and looked to Milton.

“It's uncertain if I'll be able to get 22 from Lubic right now. They're in high demand. They make enough of them, but they know our market so they keep their prices high. I doubt I'll be able to get more than 10 or 15. They won't be gold-trimmed, though the price will still be hefty. Do you still want to go ahead with that?”

Of course the company, being their intermediary, would earn more if they bought more. And there was no way to corroborate his story. But Milton still hesitated.

“Don't go over the price, just get as many as you can in this range.”

“Alright.”

Hans scribbled some notes on his paper, then moved on to the next item.

“Those ones from Yilin.. that color won't be a problem, and we should be able to get ones with the union's seal at that price. As for the silver finery.. did you have any specific factory in mind?”

“Anyone is fine, as long as they have pearl or carol on them.”

Hans frowned for the first time hearing that.

“I see.. then amber's no longer in fashion?”

“No.. I'm afraid not.”

They spoke uneasily, but like old friends. Fleur didn't have the skill to keep up with them, so she kept quiet. It felt like she was hearing them talk about their secrets in front of her, as if she was being kept at arm's length.

“Very well. I'll do my best to get these for you. Please sign here.”

Hans tossed the list on the table and rather rudely pointed where the signature went. Was it something like a contract? Milton looked at her, and she nodded. He signed, then pushed it

over to her.

“Please confirm the names of the goods again.”

Hans briefly uttered, standing at the other end of the table. It made sense, since they were buying goods from overseas - if they got it wrong, returning the items would be difficult, especially if they were dyed.

It was so troublesome to make a mistake that both Fleur and Milton were expected to sign to confirm the list and the notes that had been made. That way, there wouldn't be any argument later.

But Fleur's thoughts turned to what Ora had said earlier. She had a strange feeling.

“Is this correct?”

She checked several times before yielding her signature. Hans glanced at their signatures, then swept his eyes over both of them. Despite his poker face, they caught his surprise but said nothing.

“Then it's my turn. In the name of God..”

Both Milton and Fleur were used to using pens, but Hans was even better with them. Despite not even sitting down, and signing while standing, his signature was even more bold and powerful.. even elegant.

A signed piece of paper might as well be a contract, a declaration under God. No objections would be permitted. Those elegant pen strokes of Hans' might as well be the words of God. And how many times had he signed such papers? It was no wonder merchants commanded respect.

“Then, this contract is now formed between the two of you and this company, in the name of God.”

Fleur was only present at this high-level trade because of Ora's help, and it was the first time she'd experienced anything like it. Hans' declaration and that piece of paper felt like it set their destinies on a one-way path.

She felt something a bit like regret, but she still exhaled slowly. She was happy, even if she was nervous.

“Everything is up to you, then.”

Milton shook hands with Hans, who then extended his hand to Fleur as well. She was surprised, but thrilled. She felt a bit drunk on the idea that she was acting just like an independent merchant right now.

“It should take about two weeks to process this order.”

“That fast?”

Hans smiled at Fleur's sudden question, and nodded.

“If we had to go to the cities to buy the product, it would take far longer. But we know those rare places that stockpile them closer-by. Once we know what to order, we can find the right ports to order from. This order should take about two weeks to fulfill.. of course, that's assuming the boats aren't held up.”

Presuming the ink on the contract was dry, Hans carefully flipped it over and placed it into his desk drawer. Fleur was quite impressed, but then it wasn't beyond her expectations for a typical company. After all, they didn't have to worry about any other terms. They just needed to buy products. No one would complain unless they bought the wrong items.

Fleur averted her eyes by looking at the shelf against the other wall. There were so many papers on it - how many of them were contracts with other people like her? She couldn't stop wondering about that as they left the room.

“Let's hope it goes smoothly.”

Hearing Hans's seemingly-unintentional words, Fleur and Milton smiled and nodded simultaneously as if by tacit agreement.

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To celebrate, Milton and Fleur went to a pub suggested by Hans. The mornings were times when products that came off boats were hauled away by land, so the roads were busy. Nighttime, however, was when boats were unloaded, so the boats could leave the following morning. She'd been aware of that for years, but this was the first time Fleur really thought about it. She drank her beer without saying much, and Milton didn't bother her. He just sat across from her and smiled.

Buy clothes, then sell them. Split the profits fifty-fifty, leaving each of them with a profit of about twenty percent the cost. It took some calculation to arrive at that figure, but each time they did this their profits would increase. The next time, they would make twenty percent of 120 percent of their original cost, and after four such deals they would double their money. By the ninth time they would have five times their original investment.

If they would have the clothes in two weeks, and it took about a week after that to sell them, they could pull off up to seventeen such deals in a year. Fleur couldn't hide her smile as she considered this. She felt like a kid again as she ran the numbers through her head, and realized

she could have twenty-two times the money she had right now in just one year.

She was finally beginning to understand why merchants would do anything for profit, and why they were despised by the nobility: they could earn such great amounts in just a year. She could comment to Ora about how easy it was to earn money, and get to see the look of shock on his face. And the time when she could say that to him might not be so far away; it felt like she would be able to seize such a chance very soon.

She downed the tall glass of beer like it was nothing, though it was much more than she normally drank. This was unusual for her, but it wasn't a problem.

“You won't be able to make it home if you keep that up.”

Milton finally broke his silence after a while. By then she really was a bit drunk. She ordered another glass, but quickly lowered her arm in embarrassment. Ora would not be impressed, she thought to herself with a smile.

“Actually, I couldn't fall asleep until after midnight, looking at the candles and thinking about how much we could earn.”

“Twenty percent a shot, so we'd double things after four rounds?”

He'd come to the same conclusion, but covered his own smile immediately by drinking his own beer.

“Even I think that way sometimes, but I won't let myself pretend things will go as I hope they will.”

“Do you mean about Jones maybe taking advantage, or being unable to repay your loans on time?”

Milton looked around them cautiously before looking back at her.

“You might be being a bit too loud here.”

“..yeah, but we've already signed our contract.”

It might really be better to discuss this somewhere less open, but they were only talking here because they happened to end up here.

“I might just be being over-cautious, but no company is ever pure and sincere.”

He smiled as if mocking himself. Unlike their last meal together, they didn't have beans with their grilled lamb. He casually picked up his knife to slice his meat.

“I do sometimes work for them, but they're just another group who will do everything they can to maximize their profits.”

“It's enough to drive one into a rage.”

Last time, he could cover his expression by eating beans, but lamb wasn't as good for that trick.

“But I've thought about it. They could have charged us more cruelly. For instance, they could have charged for our introduction, or added unfavorable terms to our contracts. But Jones was being quite careful and polite this time.”

“Should we be happy about that?”

He tilted his head at her question, but it was obviously affected.

“Indeed, they gave us such good terms it's hard to believe.”

He was obviously expecting her to turn her head away in jest, so after a brief moment of silence they both burst out laughing. The feeling rippled through their hearts like a rock had been thrown into a pool.

“Then, let's work hard together.”

He reached his hand to her. She realized he was thinking longer-term than this one trade. Ora's wisdom was always with her, but she also knew she had to treasure every chance she had to catch some profit. On top of that, two people working together would enjoy themselves more than working alone. Milton didn't seem like such a bad partner.

Fleur couldn't remember the moment clearly, but it felt quite different from the time they met at Milton's home. She found herself clutching his hand tightly. But somehow she felt pained to do so, and the pain would remain after she returned home. Still, at least she was now branching out on her own power. It was the first time she'd left home and stood on her own feet. The ground beneath her felt surprisingly tough, and the hand she held felt much the same way.

Milton smiled and looked at her as they clasped hands, but this wasn't a dinner table with white linen. After their handshake they smiled at each other through their beer glasses.

“This way is best between merchants.”

Hearing her say so made him show a sad expression she wouldn't forget. He should be a great partner; she raised her glass and clinked it against his.

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After that night's dinner, Fleur reported the events around the contract signing. She included

the duration, the charges, and the emotion Hans had suddenly shown. Ora's eyes were closed during her report, but as she spoke her last word those eyes opened.

“Let's hope it all goes smoothly.”

It was the same thing Hans had said. It seemed to be something experienced merchants like to repeat. Always having expectations, just never positive ones. The safest attitude to have.

Their goods had been ordered, and they could begin selling them as soon as they arrived. Fleur had been so excited that evening that she could barely eat her meal that night. Her mind was filled with thoughts of the future, of being able to line up her life again.

If only she'd told Ora about the order she'd signed as part of their dealings. Regret was the furthest thing from her mind back then, but of course it turned out that merchants weren't saints. It took two weeks, but she finally came to understand how profoundly true that statement was.

She'd been busy during those weeks doing things she'd never done before, with her own hands. She met with so many retailers that she began to trust in her own sense of the geography of the area. She spoke with the watermill about the wool clothes, and every villager she saw seemed to be buying new clothes. She was ready: they would make a killing on this deal.

Her mind was completely full with the tasks necessary to sell the clothes they had ordered. Once this deal went through, things would be lined up well enough so that she would be able to take it easier and easier with each subsequent deal. She truly believed that would be true.

Milton had been studiously learning from the servants of the nobility who came to the city, and confirmed their financial status and the latest fashion trends. Fleur knew about the city they were in, but not the far-flung castles surrounding it. It seemed a costly game, even if the servants told their secrets, they did so for money.

She found herself amazed by how openly they did this when they came to town. She wasn't naive to think they only came to town to purchase supplies, but she never expected such treachery. When Beltra had confirmed this to her long ago, she turned away in disgust. Perhaps Beltra, too, was disgusted by it.

She had been so taken aback that she'd been unable to keep from asking Ora about it. In the process she learned that Ora and her ex-husband had once given another noble's servant a large sum of money to hear the secrets about the family's rough financial shape. She wondered if that maid vanished before the master of her castle found out. But Fleur had come to stop despising her actions; she was actually quite impressed now. It seemed clever people were everywhere.

“Milady.”

After speaking with a visitor, Beltra spoke softly to Fleur as she ate her lunch of cooked vegetables with a generous helping of cheese. There was a letter in Beltra's hand. Ora glanced at her and nodded.

“Thank you.”

Fleur received the letter and opened it. She saw Hans' signature, and read that the boat with their goods had finally arrived. She immediately closed it and held it tightly, rising to her feet. Despite normally chastising her if she didn't finish eating, Ora actually let her get away with this behavior. Fleur apologized to Beltra and threw on her coat and scarf.

“It's time for me to go earn a lot.”

Beltra's eyes opened wide and she heard Ora's sigh. But she simply tidied her coat and put on her scarf, then turned to leave. She was off to Milton's living quarters in an artisan district. Back when Fleur didn't realize her family's privileged status, she had a close friend who was actually their servant. That servant worked in the same district now, and so she had introduced the homeless Milton to a building there.

The world was made up of such an intricate web of social ties that it made Fleur's mind wander off to Ora's words on the matter.

“Excuse me, is Mr. Pabst here?”

She had been getting quite used to straining her voice to sound like a man lately. The artisan she spoke to stopped doing leather-work and looked up at her, so she repeated herself. He finally seemed to realize she was talking about Milton.

“Oh you mean Milton? He just came back and he's having lunch. Take the stairs to the fourth floor and you'll see him there.”

“Thanks.”

She thanked the young artisan succinctly, who smiled back at her happily. She'd learned that she needed to earn the favor of people like this young artisan the moment she first began working as a merchant.

The narrow staircase reminded her of a water wheel spinning under its own weight. She was used to such lower-class sights already, and was busy reflecting on how much she'd learned recently as she came up to the fourth floor.. and was instantly surprised to not find a corridor with doors where she could catch her breath.

She stood there huffing and puffing rudely, watching Milton eat his bread at his desk with a

bored expression.

“..Good afternoon.”

He greeted her in surprise after quickly swallowing his bread. Fleur wanted to reply, but was awestruck. Eventually, she produced the letter for Milton.

“It's here.”

That was all she said in the end, but thankfully there wasn't much she needed to say. Milton jumped up from his seat.

“The boat?”

She nodded, to which Milton repeated her earlier actions of nervously taking his coat and immediately walked out. They flew through the crowded port to the Jones company - that was the only way to describe their movements. They were looking forward to this moment for so long that they didn't even notice all of the people who stopped working to watch them as they ran by.

“Where's Hans?”

The moment he asked, everyone - no matter what they were talking about or checking - pointed inside the company. After quickly thanking them, they ran inside. This was their step to becoming wealthy..

“Mr. Hans!”

Fortunately for them, Hans and his workers were walking out. Milton rushed over to him and called his name. Hans lifted his eyes from the paper he was reading and noticed them, handing the paper to the worker beside him and talking with them softly.

It seemed there was big trade going on, and nervousness was in the air. But it wasn't related to them, so the worker turned and headed down to the other end of the corridor. Hans watched his back for a time before turning back to Fleur and Milton.

“You want your goods? They're here.”

He put on his business smile and crossed his hands over his chest. Maybe it was a joke the Jones company liked to play, so Fleur stiffly smiled and looked at Milton, who did the same. So she wasn't the only one who was nervous.

“By God's blessing, what you ordered has arrived safely. It was nearly delayed by strong winds, but we didn't mess it up.”

Fleur smiled again to the smiling Hans, but she found it impossible to conceal her nervousness. Milton might have noticed it too, but he seemed to be at his limit as well. He jumped into the conversation.

“So..”

He got straight to the point.

“We'd like to take them today, will that be alright?”

Speed was the most fundamental element in trade, and Hans knew that. He nodded elegantly and pointed inside.

“They're in the loading zone there. I've already asked my men to receive it. Please come with me to check up on them.”

So he'd even had their order received already? That was perfect.. but Fleur wasn't going to forget that Ora always said to check her goods before accepting her order; protests after the fact would only fall on deaf ears.

They followed Hans as he led them down the corridor. They could spy glimpses of the majesty of Jones company as they walked. Lavish maps of the sea and paintings of owners were visible, and at the end of the corridor was a door to a room with an amazing number of barrels, crates and pots.

This was, after all, a place where the sea joined with the land. Despite having some sway in the company, even Hans had to make way for the workers entering and exiting the room. They weren't just apprentices and young merchants; burly men were working there as well.

As they left the corridor they were struck by the smell of wheat. It seemed that they were handling the spring's first sacks of wheat.. the entire area was covering in white dust, and people were moving linen sacks as large as themselves. They, too, were covered in sweat and dust.

Fleur and Milton were led to a crate in one corner of the loading area, still free of dust, proving just how long it had been sitting there. As they walked up to it, the worker who had left them a moment ago rejoined them, handing them a scroll he had been carrying under his arm. That iron rod beside the crate would be prying it open.

“It all fit in one crate?”

The worker seemed to have been prepared for such a question, presumably under Hans' instruction. His eyes were sharp and he stood tall - a young man full of spirit. He nodded without saying a word, then lifted the rod.

“Shall I open it for you now?”

Why the confirmation? The two former nobles had never been asked such a strange question before. Milton nodded for both of them, so Hans told the man to carry on. The rod was poked into the crate and wedged upward to lift its cover. After it rose up a little, he removed that rod and used a smaller one to pull out some nails.

“The lid and nails can be reused, though we'll even break them when the economies' good.”

They could only nod at Hans. Every movement the worker and Hans made seemed somehow meaningful. When the young worker skillfully completed his task he stepped aside. He was likely not permitted to touch the actual products.

Hans then coughed and handed them the scroll. As Fleur received it, Milton quickly stepped forward. Their first step together in trade.. one that so many merchants had to take in order to step out into the world. He then looked into the crate-

“What?”

It wasn't his voice, but Fleur's. But Milton also saw something he shouldn't be seeing. He shuddered and spun back to her, his face pale. After turning back to see the contents of the crate, he snatched the scroll from Fleur's hands.

“What's the meaning of this?”

It was the kind of question one would only hear during a black-market trade. Fleur was shaking with such rage that if Milton hadn't been there with her she might have passed out.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Stop joking around!!”

The wheat dust on the floor was flying up in the tumult. There were people pointing at each other like they were about to draw swords, so loudly they could even be heard in this noisy loading area. Some had taken notice, and were doing their best to listen intently.

“You think this is a joke?”

Hans' expression didn't change, though he seemed to be laughing at Milton while pretending to console him.

“Why.. are the contents of this order so wrong!”

He was so angry he could barely talk. He gripped the scroll in his hand so tightly one could hear

the noise.

“An incorrect order? Not at all. In God's name, I swear there is no mistake. I purchased the products perfectly according to your list.”

Despite his anger, Milton felt strange about the sincerity of Hans' response. He suddenly relaxed his tense fingers and re-read the scroll in detail. In the meantime, Fleur walked up to the crate and peered at the blackness inside. It wasn't empty, but full of black clothing. As black as her future now.

“Why would you do something.. so stupid..”

“That is precisely what you have ordered.”

“How can you even suggest that!”

In addition to Milton's roar, the sound of the list scraping against the ground was heard as he cast it to the floor. He stared at Hans, but Hans only stood his ground fearlessly. Milton wanted to rush up to him, but was held back by the young worker.

“It seems the honorable young lord wishes to duel.. but unfortunately we are only merchants. We need only follow our contracts. Surely you understand.”

Hans' eyes were dead cold, and an indescribable smile was on his face.

Fleur eyed the scroll, which contained their signatures and the products they ordered. It should list different kinds of clothing for spring. So why? She bent her waist and picked it back up, re-reading it. Indeed, the contents of the contract had been altered. New lines had been added to certain words, changing the order to one for "black" clothes.

Why would they do this?

A similar treatment had been given to the request for four pieces of "silver" finery, which now ordered five pieces of "amber" finery instead. There was no mistaking this.

Her eyes went blank, and she clasped her forehead in disbelief. They had been played by merchants with absolutely no moral compass. Ora had carefully written their contract with Milton to prevent just this kind of chicanery, but by adding a few extra lines they had changed the words entirely.

But it wasn't just that he had changed the contract. Hans had intentionally played them like a fiddle. The moment he saw their list, he knew he could alter it. He subtly worked to get them to sign it so it became an official contract.

And despite them knowing better, he expertly distracted them so that they forgot to ask him

for a second copy of the contract. He'd played them for fools right from the start until the bitter end. They signed the contract and watched him toss it into his drawer, smiling at him like idiots.

Fleur was so upset she couldn't even cry. Monsters.. merchants were inhuman monsters.

“We have a contract.”

Hans spoke plainly and put his hand on his young follower's shoulder.

“So please pay us for services rendered.”

The young man handed him his thick ledger and pen.

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A candle burned brightest just before it was snuffed. Likewise, after Milton's anger had subsided he was depressed. He didn't say a word as they took their goods from the company. They hated the thought of asking Jones for help unloading the crate, so he and Fleur struggled on their own. Finally, one of the workers in the area gave them a hand and they managed to get everything onto a mule. But they didn't thank him, they just paid him.

"Thanks."

He left after thanking them. Would Fleur turn into such a vile creature, only interested in money? The bitterness of this realization lay heavy in her heart. And yet, a proper merchant would never have been trapped in this way, their money converted into trash.

That's exactly why Milton was so down right now; almost everything they bought was garbage to them. That might sound extreme, but if they were sold at the market price they wouldn't even get back what Fleur had invested. Of course the Jones company made out like bandits by selling them poor quality clothes as black as Fleur's future, and Milton's present mood - and their tainted contract.

“All the clothes..”

When Fleur finally couldn't take the silent atmosphere any longer, she asked the obvious. Milton didn't face her, but his entire body flinched.

“Are dark colors.”

She understood his depression, but she had to believe there was still some hope. She tried to rationalize with him, but he simply looked up at their mule, which was struggling to stay level, and smiled, exhausted.

“Like our silver turning into amber, our hopes are dashed.”

“How come..”

In truth she knew exactly why, but she couldn't bring herself to accept it. Milton smiled angrily, but simply shook his head. She understood - he knew what nobles would buy, and so he was certain their goods were worthless. Despite wanting to encourage him, she realized the reality they now faced.

“..how much can we get?”

Surely it wouldn't be zero? It had to at least be seventy percent of their cost?

“..”

He simply raised four fingers without making a peep. Forty percent.

“They're still saleable, and worth something, but not much more than trash. Such poor quality, and such dark colors.. they're only really good for funerals.”

He smiled, and gave up. His mouth was twisted into a distorted shape. Fleur was reminded of her ex-husband, but not because this situation was identical. She had no hatred of Milton.

“But forty percent can still work out, right? After all, we can double its value after four trades, so we can still make it back to square one after that, can't we?”

That seemed to be all he could take. His face lost all expression for a moment, and his mouth opened and closed, as he wished to speak, but couldn't. Finally, his limit broke.

“Stupid.”

His face was shriveled up, and he didn't seem to have the control to say any more than that.. but there was no way she could understand him if that was the only word he'd say. It looked like he wanted to continue, but he swallowed those words down. He didn't wait for her to speak, but just turned around and left.

“Mil-”

Her weak voice was swallowed up by the noise of the city, and didn't stop him. Soon he was gone. All she was left with less than forty percent of her investment. And a mule, for what that was worth. Compared to her loss - or even Hans' ruthlessness - this wounded her far more. It was all she could do to pull the mule home behind her.

Just how would Ora react? She just couldn't tell.

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“Unbelievable.”

Fleur had been expecting to wake up to another nightmare the next morning. She stared at the garden through the rain as she walked downstairs, at which point she heard Ora say that without him even turning around.

It was still a bit dark, but she saw a small piece of glass in his hands: a lens. He'd taken it from another company he worked for before they collapsed. He was probably trying to find a flaw in the documents Fleur brought back with her. The candle on his desk had been burned away entirely.

“Unbelievable. He's just too devious.”

His voice came out like a sigh; neither angry, nor flat. But it was obvious from his tired body that this was her fault.

“I'm.. so sorry.”

Hearing her repeat those words made him squint, but say nothing. Beltra took the chance to bring a cup of warm milk to her, and asked her to sit down first.

“According to my estimates, the clothes are worth maybe half our cost. But Milton does know the market better, so his estimate's probably more accurate. I'm just impressed that the company still had these clothes in their possession. Well, I do remember they were popular in the past, so it's not that surprising.”

He was pointing at the sample on the far corner of his desk. *They're only really good for funerals.* Milton's words still echoed in her mind.

“The saving grace, Milady, is that you didn't borrow money to buy them. So at least you won't have to announce bankruptcy right away. And these can still be sold, if you ever want to see some of your money again. But you're going to have to do all of the legwork.”

Fleur nodded at his soft-spoken words. Beltra was slowly adding honey to her cup, one that Beltra had carved herself. Fleur knew better than to cry or apologize right now, but she couldn't bring herself to look up. She needed to raise her eyes and shout *I won't let myself fail again, I promise! I promise!* But such proud, brave words from a determined merchant were not heard at the moment.. only the rain outside.

This was just like the first ball she had ever attended. She'd spoken to merchants and carelessly let them win her trust.. only to be used. She'd seen this corner of the world before. She knew merchants cared nothing for other's emotions, and were only out for profit.. how best to earn it, and how best to maximize it. No matter the means, all they were after was money.

Ora should have reminded her as well of this cold, hard truth.

“..I'm so sorry..”

That was all she could bring herself to say. She wanted to sink into the warmth of the cup of milk in her hands. Ora sat there, motionless. Beltra tried to stand, but was stopped by his hand. Fleur braced herself.

“It seems there really is no rest for the weary, is there, Beltra?”

Ora asked her to move the clothing into their store room, then said he had to check the eaves. Then they were gone. Only Fleur remained. Only Fleur, and the rain. It seemed to loudly be accusing her to the point where she couldn't calm herself. All she felt was shame.

Her tears finally fell into the cup she held. She felt only regret and hatred at herself for being such a useless merchant. But what finally tipped her to the point of tears was the fact that she would still have to trade with those.. creatures.

It was ludicrous; she couldn't do it. She wouldn't. She wanted to declare that to Beltra and Ora right now. She had no idea what she would do, and could only see hell ahead of her. But it didn't matter if she turned around. Hell would still be where she looked. And so she heard herself calling out to God. Just then..

“?”

She raised her head, but not because Ora or Beltra had returned. What was that noise she'd just heard? Just as she was about to decide that it was just some cat or rat, taking refuge from the rain, she heard it again. It was a knock at the door. A guest at this time?

“!”

She quickly rubbed her face and rudely blew her nose into the towel beside her. Someone was visiting them despite the rain.. it could only be one person.. one hurt, frightened, and worried person. She raised herself to her feet. This was too much for one person to bear, but what if there were two?

With that expectation, she reached her hand out to open the door. With all the rain, she couldn't believe her eyes for a second. Were they deceiving her?

“May we talk for a moment?”

Despite being asked, she was so shocked that she couldn't reply. It goes without saying that it wasn't Milton standing before her. No, it was that villain, Hans.

“I'm assuming you drew up a contract with Mr. Pabst to supply him the funds, correct?”

It was like having a conversation with a disgusting snake eyeing its prey. She was so repulsed she could only squeeze one word from her throat.

“So?”

“Mr. Pabst didn't check the goods, so you were his investor, and he was your salesman, yes?”

His luxurious leather coat was proof against the rain. The eyes staring out from under that coat were like the ones of a priest, but covered in a film of oil.

“..So-so what?”

His words were frightening. She did her best to stall for time, not knowing what his goal might be. He'd taken all of her money, and given her garbage in return. What further use could she be to him? Why had he come all this way in the rain to say such terrifying things?

In all honesty, she never wanted to see his face again. She didn't want to be seen by him, either. Yet here he was, looking at her like a snake coiling around its prey.

“Then you are not solely liable for the risk.. how much is he responsible for? Fifteen percent? Twenty?”

Her hand began to tremble on the door jamb, but not because she was struck by a chill. It was anger. She forced a reply out of her throat.

“I'm not like you! I'm not that vile!”

“How much is it?”

She was so angry looking at Hans, who obviously wasn't going to retreat, that she nearly collapsed.

“Half. Because I trust him.”

She put on her bravest front, but Hans craned his neck and replied in a frivolous tone.

“Whoo- then you've lost quite a lot?!”

That was the last straw. She was seeing nothing but red, and inhaled deeply to roar at him. But Hans was wearing an expression of understanding, and stepped up to her speaking softly.

“Then let me purchase your contract with Mr. Pabst. The full amount you paid for those products.”

That took the wind out of her sails.

“Huh?!”

“This is what we do.. transfer the claim of liabilities. It doesn't matter if you asked for interest or not, I just want to buy the fact that you loaned money to Mr. Pabst. This deal won't have any impact on you.”

His clarity snapped her out of it, and his intent finally sank in. His original plan was exposed, his actual goal. He wanted to buy Milton's debt, and thus win control of a superb salesman.

“Of course, you're free to refuse. But you should really consider your own situation first. This is hardly the time to act like a spoiled rich girl.”

His hands were around her neck. At least, that's how she felt right now.

“If all goes well, you'll still be free to marry him. I'll gladly even offer my help..”

Fleur had never punched anyone in her life.

“Then.. you're going to refuse my suggestion?”

He put his hand to his face, confirming that blood had been drawn. His expression changed entirely.

“When you're left with no other option, then use that same hand to knock on our company's door. I'll overlook this.”

He licked the blood off his mouth, glaring rudely at her.

“So, until then.”

She watched him walk away in the rain, until he suddenly turned back once more.

“When you change your mind, come find me.”

She'd reacted out of rash passion, but there was only one word in her mind right now: merchant. They could be this cruel just for profit. Just how low would they go? She stared him down until he vanished into the rain. But the thing she couldn't stand the most was that she knew that deep down, she was just as human as he was.

With that thought, she collapsed on the spot. Beltra, hearing the noise, screamed out for Ora. Fleur lay there staring at the rain falling from the eaves, wanting to cry but unable to do so. After struggling to stand back up with Beltra's help, she stupidly wandered out into the rain.

Beltra, who had run up to Ora, who was flying down the stairs asking what had happened, then noticed that Fleur had gone outside and chased after her again.

Money does change everyone. Fleur was seeing something amazing in the rain: a wagon full of goods, just next to her house. The driver's face was concealed, and the goods were piled in haphazardly, as though someone was nervously tossing them in. She shouted as loudly as she could.

“Milton!!”

Despite her tears and the rain blurring her vision, she still saw the driver's body flinch unnaturally, just before the wagon sped off.

“Milton!”

Those were the last words she said. Ora flew out of the house and covered her with a blanket before pulling her back inside.

“Milton.. Milton..”

She whispered as though she was dreaming, despite clearly hearing the conversation between Ora and Beltra. The door to their storehouse had been broken in.

“Milady.”

She snapped back to reality at Ora's serious expression.

“What.. happened?”

He held her face in his hands, so she couldn't look away. She wanted to die so badly she closed her eyes. But she knew it would change nothing.

“Milady.”

Tears flowed from her eyes like a scolded child, but he continued like some gentle priest.

“He wasn't from Jones'? Then, it was..”

Fleur nodded in confirmation. It was beyond a shadow of a doubt. Milton must have figured out what Hans was after, and had waited for his chance to steal the clothes. They would probably be worth half their cost if he did his best to sell them. If he did, he could repay his loan.

She closed her eyes again, realizing that he never trusted her. If he had, he wouldn't have needed to steal the clothing, even if he owed her money. After all, she never blamed him or asked him to return the money, and hadn't even sold his debt to Hans. Money does change

everyone; Milton couldn't even bring himself to trust her.

“Milady.”

Her eyes opened reflexively, like a trained dog's. She couldn't help it - his voice had always supported her when she was in trouble. Yet it wasn't Ora she was looking at, the one who always saved her, but a serious and determined old man.

“Please stay determined.”

She was so confused she forgot how to cry, and could only repeat him in bewilderment.

“Stay.. determined?”

“Yes. Do you want to be ignored, thieved, and forever kicked in the mud? Or stand up by yourself and achieve your own ambition?”



So that's what he meant. To continue on, she had to get the clothes back.

“Milady!”

She wanted to flee from the roar that was surely coming, like a scolded dog wanting to escape.

“Milady! I didn’t think that bringing you into this world of merchants would cause you so much pain. This is my responsibility.. I didn't mean for this to happen. I just wanted to give you a chance to gain your independence.”

As soon as he said that, he breathed in and shook his head.

“No.. this is hardly the time to talk that way. To be honest, it's because you're so similar to the young me.”

“WHAT?”

“Before I worked for your ex-husband, I worked for a famous company.. but in fact, I am the last survivor of a noble house.”

Her heart nearly stopped.

“To surpass the other merchants, I had to give up my pride and bow down to him.”

He was avoiding eye contact, and looked surprisingly old at the moment.

“Looking back on it, I'm terribly old. I can't sit on some grand chair. My master went bankrupt, and I have no heirs. So my dream, as disrespectful as this may be, is all I can leave you.”

He was mocking himself. Beltra wrapped his back in a blanket and put her hand on his shoulder.

“.. as stupid as that is.”

This was just too sudden for Fleur to react in any meaningful way. Her eyes darted back and forth, unable to meet his. He breathed in deeply and rose to his feet.

“Beltra, fetch me some cash, and my coat.”

Fleur looked up with no idea of what he was planning.

“Even if I have to pay for it with my life, I won't have you suffer. I have to accept responsibility for my own sins.”

Fleur's face was swollen from crying, but it wasn't as if she was some soulless doll.. of course his words moved her. She had to protect her own; she had nothing else, so if she couldn't stand up

and do that much, what good was she? She was terrified, and clung onto Ora's leg. She was beyond rational thought, and was simply scared of what was happening.

“Milady.”

He'd never been this gentle before. He knelt down and gently took her hand, pulling it off finger by finger.

“Don't be impulsive.”

It was like he saw through everything, but that only made her hold him more tightly.

“..”

He sighed, at a loss for words. Just then something snapped inside of her.. loving eyes were not the same as pitying ones. He was being gentle because he thought she was useless and weak. She couldn't bear that thought.

“Don't take me for a fool!”

She glared at Ora's frozen face, and stood up with a roar.

“Don't take me for a fool! That's enough! This is too cruel a joke! I'm not some child! I'll decide my own future, if I have nothing to go back to!”

Having let all of her wrath out at once, she stood there breathing at Ora.

His suggestion for her to let him handle everything and protect her was an attractive prospect, but not something she could condone. It would be nice for a while, but he wouldn't live forever. Time didn't know mercy, and humans didn't know kindness. When money was involved, betrayal was the name of the game. The time where she could bask in the sun all afternoon in some soft blanket was gone, but she had to live on.

“Then what will you do?”

Ora regarded her with a calm voice, eyes, and expression. She wiped the smile of ridicule from her face.

“I'm going to get it back.”

“What?”

“The clothes, of course. No..”

She looked at the ground and steadied her breathing before looking up at him again.

“..My determination as well. Beltra!”

She turned to her housekeeper, who seemed frightened by the tense atmosphere.

“Fetch me all the cash I have left, my coat, and my sword.”

But a good servant adapted to the situation, and Beltra nodded and snapped into action.

“Milady.”

“You're not going to say ‘Milady, don't go,’ are you?”

She stared at him without hesitation.

“I have to take it back. If he's driving a wagon full of goods, he has to take the roads. There's only one way he can go, it's not like there are a lot of roads to the castles.”

Ora didn't voice any objection; not even his eyebrows twitched. But Fleur knew what was his eyes were saying.

“But can you do this?”

She knew the question had to be asked.

“I can. I've been a merchant once, and now I'm off to get my determination back.”

A rain coat, all the cash they had left in a coin pouch, and a short sword.. those were the things she received from Beltra before turning to salute them.

“In truth I'd like nothing more than to just shiver in my bed, lying there dreaming in the blankets. But I have to be able to live on when your time comes to leave me.”

She tilted her head and smiled sarcastically.

“I.. will profit greatly from that Jones' company.”

Noble blood was worthless without the cash to back it up.

“I can only go forward now, and I understand that clearly..”

“You mean..?”

“That for us merchants, with no beliefs and comforted only by money, profit must always be our first priority.”

Ora's eyes opened wide. He was speechless, like a parent watching a child that had come into their own. Fleur shot him a lonely smile, flung on her coat and placed her scabbard on her belt. The moment her face was covered by her scarf, her heart beat painfully.

“I can't just sit here and wait for a good life.. I have chase after it, Ora.”

“Right.”

Her loyal mentor and household manager stood up and spoke.

“Well, are you going to join me or not?”

“Ah..”

“Beltra..”

She finished tying her scarf and shouted.

“We're off!”

She placed their cash in a saddlebag and immediately hopped onto a quick horse to ride off into the rain. If they let Milton get away, they'd never see him again. Even if the clothes wouldn't sell for much, she had to catch him and take them back. Questions could come later. This was what had to be done. So they rode off to get their property back.

“Ora, will I need my sword?!”

Of course her words were almost drowned out by the horse's trotting and the rain, but she still shouted it loudly. It wasn't just to make conversation, either.

“If it's as you think and he's alone, then probably not.”

Fleur's ex-husband wasn't a normal merchant, and had lost himself a few times as well. Ora had been his right-hand man during those episodes, so Fleur now felt it was her turn to rely on him in that regard.

“But are you sure you know where he's going?”

“I know the people he mentioned, and that they're the only ones he could sell such clothes to! This is the only choice he has!”

The road was muddy, and their horse stumbled several times. Fleur could ride a horse, but was no expert rider. She couldn't force the horse to run in this weather. As such, she was only able to clutch the reins tightly and trot quickly. But that only gave her enough time to think about

why she harbored no love or hatred for Milton. The only answer she could come up with was that she was just as lonely as he was.

“Milady!”

The rain had ruined part of the road, but the horse didn't stop at the sight of the pond. It was only by luck, and not Fleur's skill, that they made it through without incident. As the horse jumped she caught a glimpse of the damage done to the road and noticed the mud that filled the hole.

“Milady!”

She managed to stop the horse, though she nearly collapsed off of it in fear. Still, she managed to sit up tall. But hearing that person call to her that way made her feel more shame and remorse than usual.

“Don't call me that-!”

Upon roaring at him, she noticed his expression.

“Ora?”

The rain obscured their vision, and mud was all over the place.. the road looked more like a swamp. The mist of the horses' heavy breaths were wiped away by the rain as soon as it exhaled. Ora had stopped his own horse on the other side of the road.

“That way, milady..”

She turned her horse and finally saw why he had been calling her. She couldn't see clearly, but on the road..

Perhaps it was a miracle. That must be what had caused this hole.

“So that's what caused this hole.”

“Seems like it.”

Fleur jumped off her horse and walked up to the edge of the road. The steep slope there led down to a river. The river had risen from the downpour, and become muddy. And there between the road and river.. was a wagon with one wheel caught in the mud, and a horse facing the sky, motionless. That was where the wagon that had left her home ended up.

“Milady.”

She couldn't believe what she saw. Maybe she was seeing things. She pulled off her scarf and

carefully made her way down the slope. It was a grassy slope, but she couldn't see any footprints. But if Milton had run off, they would surely still be there.. was he dead?

Step by step, she approached the wagon in the freezing rain. When she was a few steps away, she sensed his presence. One wheel was trapped in the mud, but trapped under the wagon was a man. His face was bloody and dirtied with mud, and he seemed to be lying still as if asleep.

“..You.. came after me?”

His sudden exhalation was proof he was still alive. She stopped in her tracks, staying away from him.

“..My life is worthless.. but I still..”

His left wrist was half-cut, but his right hand still reached out to her as he spoke hoarsely.

“Please.. save me..”

Did she look like she had come to save him? She never had that intent. But then, people became desperate on their deathbeds. She wondered if he was lying.

“Perhaps.. I over thought things.. but I knew you would.. ask for repayment in the future..”

He smiled tearfully, and she knelt down to touch his face. His tears were warm.

“I'm.. so frightened..”

It might be because the muddy land was softer, but his wagon wasn't destroyed. He held her leg, with more power than she expected. If she staunched the wound on his wrist and kept him warm with the clothes on the wagon, then asked Ora to fetch him help, he should make it.

“I'll never betray you again.. so please..”

“So you want me to save you?”

She shot back, and it seemed to fire up some hope inside him. He smiled plainly.

“Please..”

She closed her eyes at his pleas, but he only gripped her tighter.

“We.. we're both nobles, are we not?”

She opened her eyes, but didn't turn to him for a second.

“..Fleur?”

She ignored the man calling out to her, and just reached her hand out slowly. It was holding a stick, perhaps a spoke from the wheel or a support from the wagon bed. She stabbed it into the ground.

“Fleu-”

He went silent, looking up at her.

“Ora.”

Fleur called the name of her loyal mentor.

“The goods?”

“They're fine. They're safe in here, only some scroll seems to have been soaked in this muddy water.”

“Truly?”

The goods were fine.. so he was saved. He smiled. But his smile didn't last long once he realized she was still holding the stick she'd thrust into the ground.

“You told me..”

She spoke grimly at Milton, who stared up into the sky with tired eyes.

“That those dark clothes.. would only be worn for funerals.”

He was quite a sharp guy. She breathed in deeply.

“You.. you have such a handsome face. I see. Really! I see.”

“Ha, haha..”

He laughed as though it was a struggle. And actually, it probably was. His face was muddied, and because of the cold it had also turned a yellowish-brown. He kept staring at the sky.

“I see.. haha..”

He closed his eyes after his exhausted laugh, then smiled.

“Damn.. I was pretending to be on my deathbed to earn your sympathy. Buy you saw right through me, didn't you?”

She knew that his pale face wasn't really an act. He was scaring the daylights out of her right now, because she knew that he really was dying.

“I kept cheating you, so I deserve this. You never stopped being a noble, huh? You, a merchant? Don't joke around! I didn't even feel bad when I cheated you. I actually felt happy! Until even God had enough of me, it seems..”

He suddenly stopped talking, because he saw her come up to him. But he didn't avert his eyes. She hesitated.. did she really have to end his miserable life?

“Hey..”

His voice scared her again, and she stepped back.

“..if you don't do this, I won't be able to go peacefully..”

She'd never forget the sound of running him through.

“..so you were able to do it after all? Good..”

She wouldn't forget the smell of the blood in his mouth, either.

He held her hand with his quivering fingers.

“..Because you won't be able to be a good merchant until you've shed your last tear and drop of blood..”

She listened to him gurgle his last breath, and held his hand for a very long time. When she finally stood up, she no longer felt like she was herself anymore. She was reborn.

“Ora.”

Her short call received an immediate reply.

“Yes.”

“Place all the goods on the back of our horses. When we return home we'll immediately prepare the dark clothes and amber finery for sale.”

“Yes.”

She stared at her bloody hand as she issued her last statement.

“His family may be in decline, but one of them has just died in an accident. They shall soon be

needing black clothes and amber jewelry.”

“Indeed, milady..”

He stopped short, sincerely, and saluted Fleur as she turned to him.

“I am not 'milady.' I am a merchant. My name is-”

Merchants could only be comforted by money, and Milton was the one who taught her this. And so, she too would choose her own name.

“Eve.”

“HUH?”

That was the mark he would leave on her life. They had been partners.

“Eve Boland, merchant, at your service.”

The rain continued to pour, so she covered her face with the scarf again and helped Ora load their goods. In this frozen moment, Eve Boland had finally taken her first step as a merchant.

