



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*

Volume 14

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

XIV



狼
と
香
辛
料



支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

文倉十

Jyuu Ayakura





Elsa Shootingheim,
Manager of the Tereo Village Church

"Incredible.."

"No kidding.."

Lawrence cleared his throat and properly greeted the girl who had put him through a hell of a trip mere weeks ago.

"Long time no see, Miss Elsa."



Lou Loah, Book Dealer
"Ah!"

They gasped as a huge lump of a man rolled into the store. Whoever he was, he was tremendously portly and was carrying a lot of goods on his back.

Flynn Jumogrundt, Lenos Grocer
"..Mr. Lou Loah, I presume?"

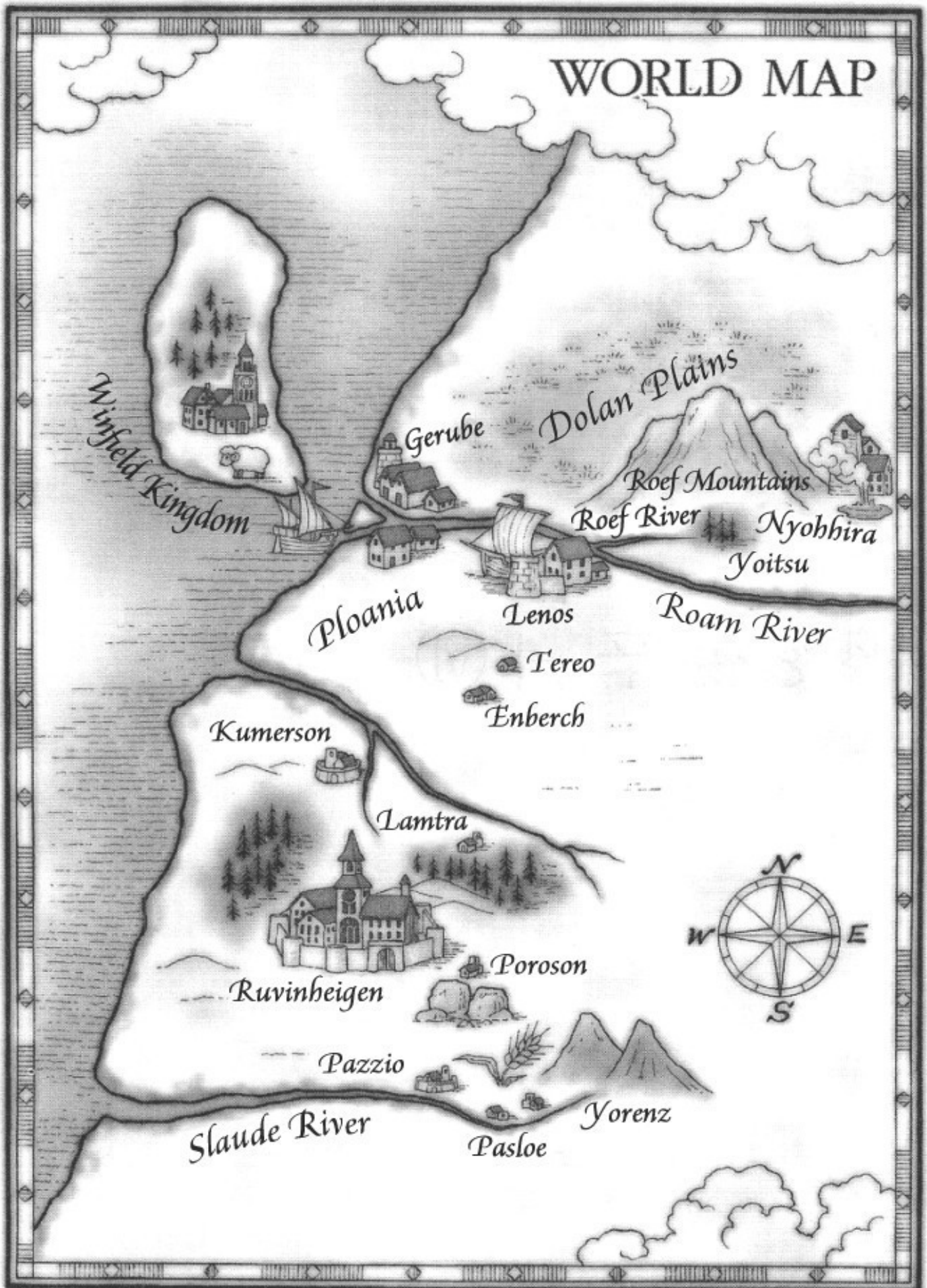


She couldn't push him away if he held her more tightly.
He just had to press her up against the wall..

"Not.. in public.."

With something behind her to push off of, she struggled even more.

"You.. foo-"



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ⑭

Spice and Wolf

Volume 14

*Translation & Editing by
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

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Prologue

I want to talk with you. That was what he was going to say when he entered her room. But the moment he did, he was too amazed to say anything at all. She simply looked too beautiful, sitting there on the bed, staring out the window.

Right now, her beauty was something he couldn't quite put into words. True, she looked lovely, and rather exotic with her tan skin. But more than that, it was because she was so calm and quiet. To use a metaphor, she was a perfect, polished gem. Humans argued and harmed one another, but right now she seemed to be entirely removed from that world.

Lawrence quietly took a seat on a chair. She didn't turn to face him, but she did speak.

"There's a merchant named Flynn In Lenos."

It was too sudden for Lawrence to know what she meant, but asking someone this beautiful to clarify seemed wrong somehow.

"He's supposed to be a grocer, but in fact he supplies mercenaries."

She finally turned to face him.

"Give him my name, and he will do everything in his power to help you."

"..Really?"

Lawrence kept quiet as well, unwilling to destroy the atmosphere.

"Is it really alright for me to know that? Or for you to tell me?"

Mercenaries lived in their own special world, where gains and losses couldn't be easily evaluated, nor the ties of glory and knighthood. It was a world that could not be understood unless one lived in it. What would happen to an outsider merchant if they leapt into that world? The person sitting on the bed right now seemed to be considering that as well.

"He owes me a favor, so this should be fine."

She smiled and returned her gaze to the world outside the window. Lawrence was reminded of the nun he had spoken to on his way here; she had told him to not show desperation.

"Flynn is the one who decides which frontier suppliers will work with which mercenaries. He should know better than anyone else if a war is about to break out in the north."

A merchant like Flynn was as vital to mercenaries as their own beating hearts. They would normally keep his true identity concealed, and yet the girl before Lawrence was telling him this. It seemed she had decided to make a break with her past, and the smile on her face now seemed to be focused on her future instead. With the hope that was the case, Lawrence decided to tell a joke, albeit carefully.

“Thank you for the unexpectedly generous tip.”

She turned back in surprise before smiling, but even that forced smile seemed beautiful.

“It’s nothing of the sort. It’s just what I promised.”

She then forced out a long sigh and laughed. From their present conversation it was difficult to imagine the situation they had been in just days ago. This girl was capable of doing whatever it took to achieve her goals. Her smile of redemption was hard-earned, given what they had gone through.

“See, the way I am now..”

She tried raising her right hand, but it was clear that she was quite frail. Lawrence could see the bandage covering her torso under her collar, but of course he knew better than to take a closer look.

“You’re worried that it’ll take you a long time, you mean?”

She smiled.

“No, actually. I want to let someone else draw it. Everything that’s needed is ready, it just has to be drawn. But I think he’ll be alright with doing it, if I ask.”

“*He* being..?”

“Well, someone else who’s traveled around with a pen.”

Lawrence didn’t press her any further once he saw the look on her face. They were in an art dealer’s home, after all, but he hadn’t had the courage to suggest that *he* be allowed to draw the map. This was just Fran’s way of helping him. They had known each other for a long time, after all.

“But won’t he be too shocked to help if I ask him?”

This time his joke did make her grin.

“Well, he told me that he wanted to earn some coin, so I should think so.”

Fran was a silversmith renowned by the nobility. Lawrence had no way of estimating how valuable her body of work was.

“You guys are all packed for your trip, right? Then I’ll have it sent to you as soon as it’s done. If I send a fast messenger, it might even get to Lenos before you do.”

Their trip would take four or five days as it was, so not having to wait for the map was a real time-saver.

“Thank you.”

She smiled once more at his thanks. This was the kind of atmosphere where they could idly chat, but with her severe wounds Lawrence wasn’t sure if he ought to trust her relatively lively appearance.

He slowly made it clear that he intended to leave, and she sighed and hugged her pillow in exhaustion. This really was too much for her right now. Still, it turned out that the former minister of a mercenary band wasn’t a weakling by any stretch.

Lawrence closed the door with quiet reverence, then spoke as he turned into the corridor.

“Yes?”

He knew his companion had snuck up on him like an animal, with a crooked look of displeasure.

“Well..”

Even her tone was unpleasant. He wasn’t sure why, and could only presume it was because he had gone to see Fran alone. But as he mulled over how ridiculous that was, she interrupted him lest he ask.

“..do not imply that I have a look on my face.”

Her bravado didn’t surprise him in the slightest, but it still made him shiver. He purposely rubbed her hooded head.

“Are you *that* scared of losing?”

He knew his hand was moments away from being bitten, given how angrily she glared at him with those reddish-amber eyes of hers. And yet, he was unafraid, and just took her hand with a smile.

“Don’t worry, that was just business. A merchant has to make sure their customers are satisfied. I couldn’t call myself one if I left a job half-done.”

Holo had a powerful desire to go to Yoitsu, and merchants lived to serve those with powerful desires. A finer match couldn't be found in this world. He tightened his grip on her hand, but she frowned.

"Truly?"

She turned her face away after saying that.

"You'd know if I was lying."

He dismissed her question, and saw her hood shift in an unnatural way. Some patches of darker hair could be seen under it, among her locks: a pair of beastly ears.

"I shall believe you for now."

Her bitterness was obvious.

"Very well then."

"Mhm."

They couldn't help but laugh about having engaged in such a forced conversation, but laughing couldn't remove the shadow that lay between them. Holo truly couldn't put on Fran's carefree expression of having left the past behind her, because the moment she did was the moment that her time with Lawrence would come to an end. Theirs was but a fleeting encounter.

Was there any chance for them to continue on after they parted? Could Lawrence visit her again after she returned to her home, Yoitsu? After all, it wasn't any more pleasant if she didn't make it back home either. Lawrence wanted to smile, knowing just how stupid his dream was, and still surprised that he had let himself fall into such a trap.

The more pressing fact was that he was nearly out of time; soon, he wouldn't be able to afford continuing their borderline vacation. Still, he wouldn't give up just because of that; to him it was just another problem to be overcome. When they were downstairs, he opened the door and asked her his customary question.

"Let's go stock up on provisions. What are you in the mood for?"

That was the smile he liked to see on her face. He couldn't help but be a little proud of his ability to win it, either. Far from being angry, he accepted her suggestion of white bread and fine wine - and without a moment's hesitation.

She couldn't just sever her ties to the past, nor would he want her to. They had sought a map for just that reason. And yet now, as the day grew near where they would have it, her tail had begun to droop in concern and anxiety.

It made him uncomfortable, because he didn't know what was running through her mind when her tail flared out because of something he said. After all, when she was angry, her tail somehow actually shrank in size. He was so lost in his concerns that he was able to overlook her barking orders at him to prepare for their trip.

序

幕



Chapter 1

First, they replaced their stiff blankets (which looked more like pallid skin), with down-filled ones. Then, they replaced their coats, cloaks, scarves, hats and gloves. Next came food. White bread, pickled meat and fish, several types of vegetables, and also medicinal herbs. Finally, and most importantly: the wine.

Lawrence wore a forced smile as he thanked Hugh for loading up their wagon for them. Five days had passed since the debacle at Tarsig, where Fran the silversmith had been severely wounded. She had only just woken up from a life-threatening fever a day ago.

The map they had been promised wasn't ready yet, but the moment Fran woke up she had called Lawrence to her room. She would make good on her promise, and not betray him as he feared she might. But that didn't mean he could stay there while she worked, and she knew that. That was why she had suggested they go ahead and depart while she had the map made.

To go to Yoitsu, Lawrence and his companions first had to go to Lenos, so he decided to keep his wagon here in Gerube while they did so. They would retrieve it on their way back, since it was more convenient to head north from Gerube anyhow. They had originally come here by boat, but it would take less time to go back to Lenos by wagon than fighting their way back upstream.

As such, Hugh lent them his wagon. Lawrence was willing to haul some goods in repayment, but it turned out that he was the only one concerned about such things. For the most part, merchants treasured their kinship, and in fact some merchants were willing to sacrifice profits in its name. Hugh was undoubtedly that kind of person.

Lawrence's polite refusals were ignored, and in fact the more he tried the more expensive items were piled onto the wagon by Hugh. Hugh was letting them use his wagon as they saw fit, and it wasn't just out of politeness. Even if that made Holo happy, Lawrence was puzzled. Hugh knew he felt obligated to repay such kindness. Being on the receiving end was fun, sure, but being put into the position of having to give back later made him feel dubious about Hugh's intentions.

"Well, anyway, that's everything."

Hugh placed a final sack of flour on the wagon. For Lawrence, all of these gifts felt like he was caught in a money shower. But for Hugh, it was all probably inconsequential, and since Holo was elated about it, Lawrence decided not to let the matter rest.

Hugh was a sheep, so his treatment of a wolf like Holo was odd, but it was ultimately his choice. Holo, incidentally, had been lying under their new blankets gnawing on jerky, having told

Lawrence to “take care of everything.”

Despite Lawrence’s profuse thanks, all Hugh did was shake his head and approach Lawrence like he wanted to share a secret.

“If you look at my net worth, this is all just a write-off to me.”

Even so, there was no way Lawrence would ever forget a gift like this. He was so thrilled he didn’t know how to reply. Clearly Hugh wasn’t lying, so Lawrence did his best to calm himself.

“Thank you so much.”

All that was left was one last handshake.

“I’ll have the map sent as soon as Fran finishes it.”

They had agreed to have the map sent to the Beast and Fish Tail, the most popular and famous pub in Lenos.

“Oh, and one last thing..”

Hugh peeked over at Holo, who was staring at the sky while gnawing on her jerky. She didn’t seem to be paying attention to them.

“I’ll also send you *that*.”

Hugh, an accomplished art dealer, had intentionally approached Lawrence to build a mysterious atmosphere. It wasn’t just to make Cole (who was brushing the leaves and dust off their goods) suspicious, but also Holo. But the self-titled Wisewolf would hardly slip up and show any interest.

She only asked a question when it was unexpected for her to do so. That was how she got Lawrence to slip up, after all. However, it was also something that could be used against her, to hide things from her. Just like Hugh was doing right now.

“Well then.. goodbye.”

Lawrence said that after lifting Cole up onto the wagon and hopping into the driver’s seat himself. With that, he gripped the reins and the familiar sounds of the wheels and a horse’s trot filled his ears.

Merchants generally avoided lengthy farewells, staying true to their credo that “time is money.” Painful departures were kept brief, as though they were arrows that had to be pulled out as quickly as possible.

Soon, Hugh had vanished, along with Fran's hand waving from her window. Cole looked back with a tinge of sadness, only to be forced to sit down. It wasn't long before they had left Gerube behind. All they saw was the road stretching out before them, and all they heard was the occasional snapping of the reins.

~~~~

Brief gusts of wind were chilling them to the bone on this already-cold trip along the river. The sky had grown quite dark, and the river with it. The river seemed so cold, in fact, that it might as well be frozen. The air was so dry it sucked all the moisture from their faces, and reminded Lawrence of his old master's habit of applying a salve on his face at times like this.

Lawrence wondered if it was about time he started taking care of himself that way. Maybe he was getting old; after seven long years on the road (almost entirely on his own), such thoughts were creeping into his head. It didn't help that his partner was free of such worries, despite caring even less about her health than he did.

"Fool. That is of no concern."

Her hair fluttered from her seat next to him, making his face itch. He stared at the sour look on her face and let her continue.

"Only you humans would care so much about your faces right now. We wolves know our fur deserves more care in such freezing weather. This tail of mine is all that I needed to warm both myself *and* Cole."

She sighed, but still continued tending to her tail, as she had been all along. Its tip was white as snow, and the rest was a dark brown.. a truly lovely wolf's tail. Of course it wasn't just a belt-like accessory; it was real.

This teenage girl beside Lawrence was in fact a giant wolf that could swallow him whole. She was a spirit of the harvest, complete with beastly ears that were now concealed under her hood.

Lawrence was long over any fears that her true form would be discovered, now that they were in pagan lands. And at any rate, she was too important for him to want to treat her as something to be concealed. She was his irreplaceable partner.

"Sure, I guess, but your tail never gets any less beautiful, so it hardly matters."

His open compliment earned him a kick, but given how high her tail had raised in response, it was clear she was just being childish. They sighed at each other wordlessly, both realizing how silly they were acting just to stave off the boredom.

“Oh, is there *nothing* to avail us of this tedium?”

Of course, she knew there wasn't any such godsend. That's why she usually fiddled with her tail or curled up and snoozed. Regardless, Lawrence took his time to think.

“Well, there *are* all the boats heading downstream.”

He pointed at the river beside them, and Holo unconsciously lifted her face from her hands to look, leaving them amusingly bare above her elbows and knees.

“I mean, if all the boats head downstream, then there won't be any left upstream, right? I wonder why we never see them heading back up the other way.”

“Huh?”

The self-styled Wisewolf was confident in her wisdom, yet turned back after sweeping her gaze across the river.

“What do you think?”

The wind blew quite fiercely, making him squint. He heard Holo hum in contemplation, and saw her lower her head in thought. Just as planned. Lawrence was using the same trick against her that his master had used on him. It only roped in those who were confident in their smarts, since they would only think of a complicated answer.

“Ah.. I, I see..”

“Oh..?”

He kept his eyes forward, but did his best to seem sincere as he added “please, do tell.” He flicked the reins to keep their horse from wandering off to nibble on some tall grass.

“Those boats carry firewood downstream, do they not?”

“So?”

“So, after they arrive at the beach they will unload that wood, and be able to head to the sea. They can then head back up the coast, bringing even more goods back upstream with them. Surely.”

Seeing her concerned face melt into pride at her answer was almost enough to make Lawrence snort in laughter. He managed to cover it up with a cough before rejecting her idea.

“Nnnnope.”

She looked at him like a confused puppy.

“You’re way too good at overthinking things.”

He poked her cheek to underscore his point. Thankfully, he was wearing Hugh’s buckskin gloves, so he didn’t have to worry when she bared her fangs and pushed his hand aside. He couldn’t help but laugh and look away from her forced bravado.

“You’re not entirely wrong, of course. In warmer months they can take rafts back up the coast. But check out the riverbank.. there’s no reeds there, yeah? They pull the boats back up on the riverbank by horse. That’s why it’s so flat.”

The river would quickly get clogged up if boats went both ways, but that hadn’t happened nor had the two of them managed to overtake any boats being dragged by horse. If they did now, it would vindicate him and maybe even cause a good laugh.

Holo sighed at him, murmuring “how wily of you.” She was being coy again, half in regret over not saving her kick for this moment, and half over not seeing through his trick. She’d been on a boat before, but it had been so excruciatingly dull that she hadn’t even thought about this.

“This wine must be better than I thought..”

She finally laughed when Lawrence did. But their laughter dissipated in the wind as quickly as it came. They had only been together a few months, even if it seemed like it had been far, far longer. These moments were flying by, and they would never return. That was exactly what the quiet smile on Holo’s face was saying right now, as she stared at the river.

If there was no such thing as eternity, then there was no reason for her to be depressed. Of course, emotion could trump such logic, as it was doing for Lawrence right now as he reached over to console her with a hug. It was Holo who stopped him short.

“Mmm. ’Twould not be bad to be in your arms..”

She dragged his hand back to his knee by the index finger. She did so gently, as only a young maiden could, but the smile on her face was downright grim.

“..But I would rather be in his.”

She motioned with her chin at the boy behind them. Normally she would be tidying her fur in the wagon, but this time she was intentionally sitting next to Lawrence in the driver’s seat. He knew better than to assume she had only wanted to be next to him, of course.

Lawrence knew just how dear Cole was to her. The boy was honest and obedient to a fault, so even if he was unsuited to thinking silently on his own, she gave him his space to think in the

wagon and she sat in the front with Lawrence.

“Has he told you anything?”

“No. Not since he spoke with *that girl*.”

She was being impetuous in order to conceal her true feelings. By “that girl” she of course meant Fran. She couldn’t keep Cole from being influenced by Fran, but it was surprising that she hadn’t listened in on their conversation in Hugh’s thin-walled home. But Lawrence didn’t even get the chance to ask her why she hadn’t before her hand was painfully pinching his thigh.

“I am the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, not some gossipy town girl.”

“Y-yeah.. Sorry..”

Her scornful stare lingered as she let his thigh go, but it wasn’t long before that mask fell off.

“It seems that I am just not good enough.”

Lawrence knew Holo well enough to understand when she was acting tough. Her eyes mirrored her soul, and when they weren’t full of confidence, they revealed her soft, sweet interior. Once again, she was feeling unneeded, just as she had after centuries of servitude. That was why she’d made Lawrence deal with Fran alone earlier. Of course, that ended up backfiring and making her even more nervous, so he gently returned her stare and replied.

“Boys all grow up someday. Or would you rather that he always remained a child?”

A sheltered fledgling would never leave its nest if it wasn’t pushed out. Cole had begun his journey with a strong sense of determination, and he would lose that edge if he remained in Holo’s custody. Lawrence knew she didn’t want that. Sure enough, she averted her eyes and sighed. But he caught her peeking back at him through the white mist of her sigh.



“And I suppose you feel ’tis better this way?”

He wouldn’t shrink back from such provocation. In fact, his prior gentleness turned into full-out sincerity.

“Yeah, I think it’s for the best.”

Her fist pounded down on his thigh, but it remained there as if she had no intent to remove it.

“Indeed. I am not God.”

She made it clear just how un-God-like she was by raising her eyebrows like a maiden who was losing her temper. God was a righteous being clad in pure white, after all. But merchants could only love a slightly off, slightly less pure white. Her hand wasn’t alone for long.

“Yeah, it’s definitely for the best.”

And so, Holo didn’t lose her temper this time. She just rested her head against his shoulder. She didn’t pry into the affairs of others; she left that job to him. That made sure he would be sucked into her worries. It was just the kind of off-white strategy that suited her.

Her words were never kind, and she exuded power and unconcern. But those qualities were the furthest from the truth. She simply didn’t speak first, and wouldn’t add her worries to the worries of others. It wasn’t that she hated helping others (in fact she was happy to do so) but that she waited to be asked first.

Having traveled with her and Cole made this aspect of her character crystal clear, even to Lawrence. The fact was that she even treated Cole that way. Lawrence was the only exception. He seldom realized just how slow he was, but it really dug at him to realize it now.

He really wanted to redeem himself, and had been subtly trying to make up for it by treating her during meals. Holo wouldn’t have missed that her portions were always larger than his, but the fact that she remained quiet about it implied that she appreciated it.

~~~

The three of them pressed onward, even more quietly than usual. They thought to themselves in silence until some noisy fishermen broke the mood.

“Pull!”

The men were pulling a net from the river, spurred on by the beat of a drum. Others were keeping the net from getting tangled as they pulled it, and there were even some merchant-like men studying the creatures being dragged in the net.

The lord of the area laid claim to the river, so fishermen needed his authority to fish. That's why there were also poker-faced soldiers overseeing the activity, carefully documenting the number of fish that were caught.

The fish were loaded into water-filled barrels on a wagon. Those barrels were soon marked with lime chalk, and the wagon began moving. Of the many boats on the river, those with fish were likely carrying them from far upstream, where tolls weren't a concern.

As the net was raised it became clear just how heavy it was. The men roared to the beat of the drum, and only after the loudest of those roars did they finally pull it free from the river. It was likely full of huge catfish (a rare catch this time of year) and other fish that thrived on whatever was dropped by the boats passing over their heads.

It was a relief to see something moving in this cold, almost-dead winter landscape. Anyone would feel that way, even it was only relief, and not happiness to be working right now. Regardless, they all clapped when the wagon began on its way, with Cole and Holo happily joining them. Lawrence then popped some jerky in his mouth and turned back to them.

"Alright you two.. get ready!"

"For what?"

They looked at him in unison.

"I hereby declare this fishing expedition officially over! By the will of the merciful Lord Ozpy, any remaining fish are free to those who have gathered here!"

The official then lowered the spear he had raised, and everyone who had been looking on stood up. Many fish were left behind on the riverbank after these expeditions, and landowners loved this tradition of giving gifts to onlookers. It was a gesture of goodwill to keep them from doing any unauthorized fishing, and always made their subjects happy.

Men and women alike used their coats as nets to grab what fish they could. Holo and Cole stared at one another for a split second, then ran off into the crowd. Holo was so excited her tail nearly made an appearance. Lawrence happily watched the two of them as he chewed on his jerky, then joined some others who had lit a bonfire.

Today's dinner was earlier than usual, but for once the roasted fish wasn't salted to preserve it. Holo and Cole ate like they were competing to see who could eat the most between the two of them. Manners were the furthest thing from everyone's minds, but that's only because mirth made them unnecessary.

~~~

Were Lawrence adhering to his normal trading routine, he wouldn't be back in this city for another year. It was a routine he figured he'd always adhere to, but here he was, arriving in Lenos after leaving Gerube. It was hard for him to wrap his mind around it all.

"Huh.. you're not upset this time? How rare.."

He put away Hugh's letter of introduction before saying that.

Their wagon was loaded with expensive goods, the likes of which would levy a terrible tax if they were sold at the market. And yet, Hugh had taken that into account, and written a letter in the name of a local lord he was friends with, so Lawrence would be taxed at a lower rate.

Maybe they were used to art dealers exerting their influence, given how expensive their goods were, but at any rate the Lenos guards had treated the matter carefully. Lawrence had expected a quicker check, but they were even more strict than usual. Which is why Holo's tail was once again referred to as a "cheap wolf's tail" by a guard who didn't know how lucky he was.

"'Twould be stooping to his level. Besides, even I must admit that such an exhausting trip would take its toll on my tail."

She sighed as she stretched, clearly kept in check by her need to take the higher ground. And yet, she probably was tired, given that Cole was the only one who seemed at all interested that they were in Lenos. Lawrence decided to chalk that up to this being his first trip to Lenos.

Frankly, it was more likely that Holo was mentally exhausted, rather than physically. Even after the excitement of their fishing encounter, she'd even hopped off the wagon to walk beside it several times. It had been enough to make Lawrence crack wise about her letting loose and running around in wolf form.

But he immediately regretted it when she seemed to actually take him seriously. He couldn't take the chance that she *wasn't* joking around just to get back at him. And if she was, then opening his mouth could only earn her wrath. All he could do was stay quiet and hope for the best. She went as far as to arch her back like she would howl at the moon. Deep down, he wanted to let her run freely, but it was still unnerving.

"When we arrive, I'll make sure our hosts bring us hot water for a bath. We'll all feel better once we wash the dust off ourselves."

"Please make sure they bring their finest oil, too."

Oil was something she needed to most effectively comb her tail. Lawrence knew that long ago, but he only realized how much of a difference it made when they stayed at Hugh's residence. But it was also an expensive luxury, so he firmly declined.

She didn't voice her protest clearly at that; instead she muttered weakly under her breath, "you cannot even do that much?" Perhaps her mood had just improved enough to let him off the hook already.. or perhaps she had intentionally started bargaining at a high price she knew he wouldn't accept.

"At any rate, how long do you plan on staying in this city?"

She curled her arms around her legs and placed her chin on her knee. Clearly, this was more important to her. Lawrence had to think about it, but he still gave her an optimistic estimate.

"Three, maybe four days. We need information and clothes and such for traveling further north.. not to mention food."

"Very well."

It seemed that his answer agreed with her, given her gentle sigh and the pleasant way she flicked her ears. Lawrence cleared his throat and continued.

"That said, I may be being a bit optimistic. If others are heading north from Lenos, it'll be easier on us.. but if we're the only ones heading into the snow, we'll have to be quite thorough before we risk the trip. After all, we're heading to Diva Company, then Nyohilla."

Nyohilla.. that was a name likely to stir up Holo's heart, being one of the few names she still remembered from the past. Sure enough, she turned her eyes away, unable to conceal her melancholy. Lawrence smiled compassionately and tried to make up for his blunder.

"Hey Cole, have you ever heard of Nyohilla?"

He wasn't sure what else he could do in this situation, even if it meant confusing Cole with such a sudden question. Thankfully, Cole nodded in response.

"I've.. heard the name."

"It's a hot spring town, quite old. I've been there once, it's quite an amazing place."

"How so?"

"Well, it's like a social hub out in the middle of nowhere. Even the higher-ranking clergymen all go there, so they've been free of conflict for centuries."

Cole couldn't believe his ears. His own village had even preemptively praised God, but that didn't stop the Church from attacking them. Thankfully, Cole's reaction was managing to keep the atmosphere neutral.

“Yeah.. lots of suffering people get the idea to take a trip there for some peace.”

He gently rested his arm on Holo’s head.

“But that would only be temporary.. it’s not like conflict will ever end.”

“Of course. Even if hot springs can cure your ills and make you forget your pain, it won’t keep it away forever.”

Holo stole a glance at Cole and tossed out a few bored words of her own.

“The springs were so hot when I went there, that I fought to find a cooler one.”

Lawrence wondered if she was upset with him, but it wasn’t enough to make him nervous. He just rubbed her head and removed his arm to retake the reins, so he could navigate them around a pack of dogs barking on the road.

“The merchant that Fran’s introducing us to deals with mercenaries.. I’ll be happy if a soak in the springs is enough to soften a guy like that up.”

“I shall be happy enough if we stay in a luxury suite.”

The quality of their lodgings usually dictated the quality of Holo’s mood. Lawrence pushed Cole, who had stood up, to sit back down as he muttered to himself.

“Right.. Arold’s place is likely closed.. we’ll have to find another inn..”

“I should think that a grand-looking inn would be the kind of place we head to.”

She squinted as she forced out those spiteful words. She had taken the higher ground instead of getting angry at Lawrence, so he really had no recourse now. He didn’t want her to force him into yet another game where they would part ways.

“Then let’s ask around.”

“Just who do you intend to ask?”

Her eyes made it clear that the last people she wanted to see were the uncouth men of the Delink Company. She was practically their hostage not that long ago, so going there was simply not an option. Their haughty arrogance was more than a match for a pompous noble.

They were the last kind of businessmen anyone wanted to deal with. But it wasn’t like Lawrence had a choice. They were an important business contact now. Even if it repulsed him to talk to them again, he would have to deal with them again eventually. It would be daft of him to sour relations with one of his biggest ties to the business world. He nervously smiled and

scratched his nose.

“Well, thankfully I still know some others, who we’ll have to deal with to get the map anyhow. I figure we might as well break the ice by asking *them* if there are any other good inns in town.”

Mere weeks ago, virtually every merchant tied to the fur industry had been in Lenos. The town was still lively even now. After all, a storm couldn’t be kept in a bottle. They were passing through the tail end of that storm now, with Lawrence’s skilful steering. Mercifully, that meant he was given a moment of reprieve, permitted to silently do his job until they were finally blocked by a procession of people crossing the street with cages full of chickens.

“By *them* you surely mean *that* place, do you not?”

“Indeed. *That* place. The Beast and Fish Tail.”

“Yes, *that* place.. the one with that wonderful rodent dish.”

Holo adored that dish, so it would surely smooth things over if they enjoyed a meal there. With that thought in mind, he finally gripped the reins as the last of the noisy chicken-carriers cleared the way.. only to hear Holo mutter dryly under her breath.

“How very kind of you.”

What? Was she being sincere or not? It took a few seconds, but the image of a certain waitress popped up in his mind. The waitress who worked at the Beast and Fish Tail pub.

“Ugh..”

His voice caught in his throat.

“Good thing I shall be heading to Nyohilla, where I can *forget my pain*.”

Her hostile eyes were full of scorn. Cole’s head tilted in confusion; Lawrence couldn’t look to him for help. Finally, someone shouted at him for blocking the road, snapping him out of it and giving him an escape route. But it was Holo’s malicious laughter that he *really* wanted to escape from.

The steeple of the Lenos church was visible from just about any street if you only looked up. That’s exactly what Lawrence was doing right now, in prayer.

~~~

Pubs generally saw the brunt of their business in the evening, and the Beast and Fish Tail was no exception. It was no surprise to see someone preparing for the eventual influx of customers, huddled around a bucket full of shells.

“Hello!”

Lawrence greeted that young girl brightly as he entered the pub, and she looked up at him while shielding her eyes from the sudden rush of sunlight sneaking in with him through the door.

“Oh? Back so soon, Mr. Merchant?”

“It’s hard to stay away from such fine service.”

Cole was dealing with their goods outside, so only Holo was with Lawrence. His inner prayers intensified as he commanded himself to not do anything foolish in front of these girls. Things seemed mercifully civil on the surface, but he didn’t need his merchant instincts to know the truth.

They were sizing each other up. He couldn’t help but feel a point of pride that he was the reason for this battle of wills, but he knew better than to get ahead of himself. This was more about two hunters preparing to fight each other, and not so much the prey caught between them. This was hardly something to take lightly.

“Are you here on business again?”

She casually shucked the clams as she spoke, tossing their shells into the bucket on her left and their meat on the plate in front of her. Her movements flowed naturally, and the sunlight reflected off her carefully-wrapped knife as she did so. She was so skilled that the slightest flicks of her wrist were all she needed to get the job done magnificently. Everything about the girl screamed confidence, to the point where Lawrence couldn’t help but smile. She smiled back and continued.

“You’re far from the first merchant to come back, after all.”

Of course not, given how rowdy the town had been lately. She must have been inundated with questions from merchants by now.

“Got it in one.”

“A merchant’s heart drifts like sand, but then who am I to complain? I guess the world’s just what it is, and we all have to face reality some day.”

She was still facing him, but her eyes were on Holo. It was embarrassing, but at least Holo’s smile was a happy one.

“Reality, you say?”

She looked up at Lawrence, making it clear that smile wasn't a fake one. She was a Wisewolf, so the girl would have to try harder to provoke her. That eased his mind, but only for a moment.



“The reality is that merchants work hard to earn their profits, but they are just as dull as that knife of yours.”

The waitress smiled again as Holo grabbed his collar. He gulped, wishing he could be anywhere but here.

“Um, well, to be honest I’m actually here to ask a couple of questions..”

“..what kind of questions?”

It took her a few seconds to reply, on account of having a staring contest with Holo. Thank goodness Cole wasn’t there, or he would see just how pathetic Lawrence really was.

“Well, first about the furs- whoa!”

The shell she was holding suddenly broke apart. It may have been because she was distracted, but it seemed more likely that she had done it intentionally. Before Lawrence could even wonder what she would do next, she popped the raw clam meat into her mouth. She then grabbed a small cup beside her and took a huge swig. Whatever it was, it seemed potent - possibly burning wine.

“Really? The furs?”

She was being coy again. It seemed like her default behavior. Yet another of her charming points as a waitress. She seemed to have realized how interested Holo was in the clam meat and wine. These two really were a dangerous match for each other..

“Um, well, no.. To be perfectly honest we’re stuck here for a while and I was hoping you could recommend a good inn.”

“Oh my..”

The girl pouted.

“Never have I been asked something so presumptuous.”

“..?”

Lawrence was caught so off-guard that his mind went blank. He just smiled at the girl blankly until Holo jumped in.

“*Of course* she means that you are already in the finest inn.”

“Wha..? Oh, geez..”

It finally made sense, but it took his breath away that Holo had to explain the joke to him. He could wheel and deal with the craftiest trader, but he was completely out of his element with these two.

What should he do? This was where Fran was going to send her map, so getting on their bad side wasn't particularly wise. This place was a valuable resource to him. But he would also find himself staring at Holo's fangs if he let the waitress lead him by the nose.

Why had he brought Holo here, of all places? His prayers intensified as he froze up completely in this hole he had dug himself into. He just wanted to pull the dirt in over himself.

"Ahahaha!"

Holo finally exploded into laughter.

"Hehehehe!"

She stared at Lawrence with pity, but was unable to stop laughing no matter how hard she tried. He was dumbfounded. Even the waitress had covered her mouth with her hand and was gently giggling behind it.

"..?"

Merchants never went somewhere without knowing the language being spoken, and they hated spending money on a translator even more. He was completely lost, and really only had one defense in such a situation.

He smiled sheepishly, realizing that this was the last refuge a merchant had. He nervously began laughing. The waitress finally burst out into peals of laughter as well. They all laughed until Holo had finally managed to calm down long enough to dry her tears.

"My, but are we ever fools!"

The waitress also had to dry her own tears, and take a sip of wine, and catch her breath before she could finally nod back.

"Oh, that we are! What a pickle that was! Oh my, that was too much.."

The waitress's shoulders finally slumped and she dropped the piece of clam meat she had been holding over her plate. She then quickly shucked the few shells that remained, wiped her knife on her apron, and finally stood up.

"I've always liked them with salt, but strangely enough I've never thought of eating them without it."

“Ah, yes. So you have an eye for cooking.. how promising.”

She chuckled a bit before waggling her knife at Lawrence.

“I recommend Sister Eunice’s lodge. I’m sure she’ll even give you a discount if you mention me.”

She earned another smile from him; a good merchant never forgot to smile in thanks.

“I appreciate it.”

“Jeez.. if *that’s* all you came for, then why don’t I cook your supper? I can deliver it to Eunice’s place.”

Lawrence peeked over at Holo for her approval, and saw the two girls smile at each other.

“Ok, ok, I get it.. you don’t want to be disturbed. I’ll have someone else bring it over if you’d like.”

She raised her hands in surrender, and Lawrence felt Holo’s foot lightly press down on his. It seemed he had barely passed somehow, even if he had no clue how to read the two girls in front of him.

“I’ll need some time to cook it, but it’ll be there before the sun sets. Just leave the selection to me, alright?”

“Alright then. Oh, but there’s one more of us, so please make sure it’s enough for three.”

“One more?”

The girl was quite surprised; Lawrence couldn’t help but smile back.

“Lucky for me, it’s not another girl.. just a lad we picked up along our way.”

“Oh, I see.. You’ll have to introduce us later, okay?”

She tapped the knife blade against her cheek menacingly. Cole wouldn’t stand a chance against her. She’d devour him whole. Lawrence didn’t need Holo’s help to understand this joke, so he shot her a playful glare.

“Ah, okay, okay..”

The girl surrendered, and fluttered her apron. Lawrence could finally sigh and relax. But he was forgetting the most important detail.

“Oh right.. and-”

“Hmm?”

The girl stopped dusting off her apron and looked up at him.

“I’m expecting a letter from Gerube, and I’m having it sent here since I have no address of my own.”

“Oh? I see. From whom?”

“Hugh, an art dealer.”

“Oh!”

Her apron fell as she exclaimed.

“That guy who looks like a hog? He comes by here once in a while, saying ‘I just can’t stay away from these delicious fish tails.’ He seems to eat them by the boatload.”

If he was so overweight, why would he come all this way to eat even more? Lawrence chuckled under his breath, knowing that Holo would be wondering the same thing.

“But why here?”

“Hmm?”

Lawrence wasn’t sure why she was asking. The girl had paused while raising her plate of clam meat to take it back to the kitchen.

“I mean why have it sent here? Surely you must have another place for such business?”

Was that loneliness he spied in her smile? He couldn’t tell for a moment, but decided she was probably just sincerely puzzled.

“Well, not really, I’m from pretty far away. It’s not a problem, is it?”

“Huh?”

She seemed genuinely surprised. Even Holo looked up at Lawrence in confusion.

“Well, if the deliverer is looking for another excuse to sample our cuisine, then who am I to stop him?”

She raised her chin with a smile.

“After all, it’s not like I can go all that way to deliver it to him. I’ll just take it as a compliment that he’d go out his way for my cooking.”

The girl was probably quite famous. The Beast and Fish Tail was a name one heard all over the region, and she was the kind of girl that might have stolen his heart, had Lawrence not fallen for Holo already. He chuckled at himself as she vanished into the kitchen.

Their mission was accomplished, so Lawrence and Holo turned to head back to their wagon.

“I wonder if you would have laid in the dirt your entire life, had I not discovered you.”

He sighed, and decided to interpret her meaning this way: he was an uncut and unpolished gem that had one day captivated her.

“Probably.”

He gently took her hand and thanked God that he survived this ordeal in one piece.

~~~

Nothing made one quite as hungry as the smell of minced and salted garlic. It surprised Lawrence, but he was drunk before Holo for once. He couldn’t help but remember how she looked at him as she drank him under the table, then smiled at his unappealing drunken face while Cole helped him back to their room.

He woke up well after the sun had risen. His heavy head felt like it was full of sand. He stank of wine, and was all alone. He tried shaking the bleariness from his eyes, but that only intensified the hell he was seeing, so he clapped his cheeks with his palms and rose to his feet.

The metal jug on the table had been refilled, but it was so cold it was freezing over. He cautiously sipped at it while getting his bearings. Holo’s cloak and robe were gone, so she had left. He nervously checked his purse, but she hadn’t taken any money.

“Then where is she?”

He stretched and took a look outside, dazzled by the sun. As he squinted at the road, he saw a woman carrying a basket on her head, and a lad running next to her. It was quite an ordinary scene, so at least the town was in order.

He sighed and rubbed his beard before finally spotting something white in the distance. Upon closer observation, it was two people walking toward him.

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“The church?”

He studied his reflection in the well’s water bucket as he asked Holo, who had seated herself next to him at the well.

“Mhm. It stank of wine and garlic, and Cole had been pleading with me to attend mass, so we went.”

Lawrence didn’t have any comment on the room’s smell; he was accustomed to waking up on the receiving end of that stench often enough. He wet his knife and began to shave.

“Was it crowded?”

“Very. Suspicious-looking people were not allowed in, but we were.”

A traveling nun and her child companion could squirm their way past the stubbornest of guards, so that was no surprise. But Lawrence was quite puzzled by Cole’s desire to attend mass. He was just interested in learning Church Law. Many of those who attended mass did so while believing in another God, so maybe that was it? Or was he really becoming a believer? Perhaps he really was just that simple and childish.

“I’m a bit surprised you agreed to enter the lair of your enemies.. I take it you were just in a good mood?”

Holo dangled her legs like a little girl as she sat on the well, making him suspect that she probably was in a good mood. It eased his mind to see her happy.

“Mhm. It made him smile, and it feels like forever since I saw him smile. At first it seemed forced, but he really does seem different after attending mass.”

She giggled, and Lawrence followed suit.

“Well, I guess even *you* can share him with others.”

Holo ignored him, evading the topic of her mixed feelings toward the Church. Instead she spoke in a proud, yet relaxed tone.

“I am above such matters. I know what things are truly important.”

Lawrence nearly cut himself at that, and checked his razor to make sure.

“..Such as?”

“Most things seem trivial when I see Cole smile.”

He could see her face reflected on his knife without looking at her, but he did so anyway as he resumed shaving.

“And I was overjoyed when he told me that he wished for me to join him.”

It was such an obvious joke that she laughed at having said it. Holo was generally honest about what she loved and hated.

“Even a simple-minded merchant like me knows you could just ask him.. so why haven’t you?”

Holo was quite upset that Cole wasn’t telling her what was bothering him, so Lawrence felt he should take this chance while they were alone to point that out, even if he was shaving. Holo reacted by hopping down and making some huffing and puffing noises. Lawrence was about to hop down as well, but it proved unnecessary. She spun around after two steps and finally replied.

“A Wisewolf has her reputation to maintain.”

He smiled at her joke, his back quaking with contained laughter.

“Whew, that’s a full-time job!”

He replied with mirth, and she wagged her tail in response.

“Yes, ’tis.”

He honestly couldn’t tell how much of her statement was actually true, but at least she wasn’t that way with him. She was openly sharing her thoughts and feelings with Lawrence, and that alone was enough to ease the lonely merchant in him. He suspected that she felt the same way, even if she kept her face hidden from view. That didn’t matter; he could sense the warmth of her aura and make an educated guess these days.

“Would it upset you if I say that I long to return to Yoitsu?”

Yoitsu was, of course, their final destination. The moment they arrived, their journey ended. But he was able to smile.

“No, because I too want to be wise someday.”

He suspected she was smiling at that. But she kept quiet, so he resumed shaving. After a time, she hopped back on the well beside him. Having finished shaving, he studied the results and watered the plants next to the well with what remained in the bucket.

Holo hopped aside, like a butterfly disturbed by his sudden movement. But after sheathing his knife and feeling his face, he realized she had moved back next to him. It seemed that she

wanted him to take her hand, so that's exactly what he began doing.

Unfortunately, just then, Cole made his appearance in the garden.

"Oh!"

Holo yelped at the sight of Cole holding a pan. Lawrence couldn't hope to compete with food from the Beast and Fish Tail, no more than the innkeeper here could hope to do so. Holo shot off, leaving his hand at his side, grabbing thin air.

".."

Holding hands was something important to merchants, and not just shaking them to seal a contract. He wasn't sure if he should bother her with that detail, though, given how eagerly she was running off to Cole. That was good enough. If their trip had to end, the least he could do was let her laugh as heartily as she could right now. He stared at the sun for a moment before running off himself.

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After eating breakfast, the three of them began walking around town. They were heading to Flynn, the merchant who was formerly a mercenary, and was now a "grocer." In fact, he was still a provisioner for mercenaries on the side.

Lawrence couldn't help but be nervous about that, in spite of his ability to remain calm when doing business. He firmly believed that merchants were willing to risk their own lives for profits, and many of them were desperate enough to be no better than thieves. Many merchants were, in fact, quite capable of outright robbery. And this man dealt with mercenaries.

Still, being a mercenary supplier in a city wasn't as dangerous as being the traveling merchant who actually delivered the goods to them in the field. Such shippers were called frontier suppliers, and quickly became swept up in the pace of their customers.

It was a lucrative business, given how spendthrift mercenaries were. The lucky frontier supplier responsible for a successful mercenary band could earn enough to become a town merchant in just two or three years, even if they were a greenhorn.

Of course, that was just a rumor. A beautiful story like that meant very little to those who knew the true attitudes of mercenaries. Just finding a kind one was hard enough, let alone one that stayed alive for very long.

When mercenaries lost, they were robbed and probably killed. Any merchant supplying them was taking an incredible risk to do so. Such merchants had little in common with Lawrence, so he had good reason to be nervous.

This particular grocer was quite far from the market, and his shop looked just as atypical. But there was an air of excitement about the place, making Lawrence breathe in deeply and even causing Cole to swallow. Holo was the only one who ignored the mercenaries. In fact, she stretched and eyed the cats who were lazily basking in the sun around them.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Having finally willed himself forward, Lawrence reached out for the doorknob. Just his luck that it was opened as he reached for it.

“Alright then, I’m counting on you.”

“Ya know, it’s customary to show your softer side when you say something like that.”

“Ha! That *was* my softer side! That’s just how I fell out of the womb. My generals are the same way.”

A bearded man walked out past Lawrence, the type one didn’t need to get a good look at to realize they were a mercenary. Lawrence couldn’t tell whether the man was born that way or was just hard-bitten from years of experience, not with that wiry grey hair and face as red as a drunken man’s. He looked ready to burst into flames, and scar on his face that made it seem like opening his left eye didn’t happen easily. Lawrence wondered if the man even noticed him before the other man quipped about him.

“Oh ho, this guy looks promising. He should prove worthwhile.”

“Hmm? Hmmm..”

The scarred mercenary bent down and studied Lawrence carefully, like a creature that could scare a wolf away. He was the type that could kill with a smile. Lucky for Lawrence, he knew that neither fight nor flight were the appropriate responses. Acting tough or being cheerful would be equally bad. A quiet smile was the way to go.

“Pssh.. nah. This guy’s no good. He’s just a merchant, a speculator. He’ll turn tail as soon as he gets his share.”

His impoliteness wasn’t spoken with hatred, just the tone of a man who’d seen enough merchants to be able to make a snap judgement like that.

“But hey, he seems young and sturdy, so maybe we’ll see each other on the field some day regardless.”

The man’s large hand smacked Lawrence’s shoulder and he laughed before turning away to leave. Lawrence had no chance to even introduce himself; their meeting was over just as soon

as it had begun, like a cloud had just passed in front of the moon at night.

“He would surely make for a fine drinking companion.”

Holo’s blunt assessment made Lawrence’s smile widen, but the other man just coughed.

“Well then, how can I help ya, Mr. Young Merchant?”

Lawrence straightened his back nervously and introduced himself. The dark shop was quite bare, but still felt crowded somehow. It might be the lack of many windows. Glass windows were, of course, the domain of nobility; most people had to settle for oiled paper covers or just shuttered holes in the wall. Not this place. It felt like a cargo hold, like any more windows would just get in the way of business.

Flynn was the proprietor here. He was a middle-aged man nearly Lawrence’s height, with a gimp leg. Anyone who saw him could picture him carrying a sword in his younger days. He sat at his desk, waiting for Lawrence and his companions to seat themselves on the bench in front of him.

“Well, you certainly have bad timing.”

Those were his first words, spoken as he poured wine into his cup.

“Bad timing?”

“Yeah. Timing is everything. We were ready last week, so if you want long-term work, your only bet will be to serve a reserve squad.. but what’s with these two? The fires of hell will swallow ya alive if you bring them with you.”

It finally dawned on Lawrence that Flynn thought he was here as a supplier.

“Uh, no, I’m not here to supply the troops.”

He smiled and continued.

“I don’t even want to be a supplier in the first place.”

Flynn stared at him like he was watching kids playing in the distance. He then smiled and sighed like someone preparing to pardon themselves with an excuse about getting old.

“Ah, really? Sorry about that. It’s been so busy lately that I got a bit ahead of myself. Well then..”

He took a sip, drinking like any frontier supplier who tempted fate would drink.

“Why’re ya here? You don’t have your eyes on our wheat supplies, do ya?”

Being a “grocer” meant that Flynn had a sign for trading wheat as well. But he was being painfully blunt about the obvious fact that this wasn’t really that kind of shop. As a town grew, the markets fragmented as well. Merchants specialized, with some selling shoes and others medicine. But this wasn’t that kind of place; nor was it a specialty shop selling curiosities or dealing with money. There was a good reason Flynn had to specialize as a “grocer.” This clearly wasn’t the place for a normal wheat merchant.

“I’m here because Fran Bonilly told me to come.”

Traveling merchants had their own specialities too. One of those was knowing when to throw out a name. The fact that someone gave a merchant their name usually meant that they owed a debt that hadn’t been repaid yet, possibly for several years. It was even more likely that the merchant accepted their names in lieu of profit, for some other goal. Just like now. Flynn’s scornful attitude quickly became serious at the mention of Fran, and he eyed Lawrence carefully as he set down his drink.

“Is she still alive?”

His respectful tone was obviously not to build rapport with Lawrence.

“Yes. The only one.”

A simple answer like that would make sense to someone in his line of work, and Flynn quickly understood. Lawrence heard him whisper “really?” under his breath, but it wasn’t aimed at Lawrence. Flynn lowered his head and closed his eyes.

“Well, I guess that’s just how things are, no matter how I feel about ‘em. Is she fine, at least?”

His voice was louder again, this time with a tinge of nostalgia.

“She fought bravely enough to win some fame, and earned some injury for that. But she ought to recover soon enough.”

Flynn smiled as though a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Even if she was the last of her band, he could take solace in the knowledge that at least she had survived.

“May the rest of ‘em be rewarded for their courage in their next life. Ah, sorry..”

He rose to his feet, and put his hand on his chest to report his name.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Flynn Jumogruandt, the thirteenth heir of the Jumogruandt line, and owner of Jumogruandt Grocers.”

He then stuck out his hand, and Lawrence marvelled at how unexpectedly soft his palm felt.

“Well, the Jumogruandt family hasn’t seen battle for centuries. Some of my customers insist on calling me a former mercenary, but it was my ancestors who fought. Their contributions to this city’s founding were substantial, and that’s why they let us operate here.”

“I see.”

Lawrence gently coughed and began talking.

“I’m actually here to learn how things are up north right now.”

“Really?”

Flynn eyed his cup, as if looking for answers in the wine.

“I sure didn’t expect anything like that from someone Fran introduced. And here I thought I could size a man up in a second.”

Lawrence just shrugged and smiled.

“I suppose one look at my companions should be enough to tell you just how odd I am.”

Flynn finally took a good look at Cole and Holo. Lawrence remembered the time a mercenary revealed that merchants were reputed to hire beautiful girls to distract people from the quality of their wares. It seemed Flynn had heard that wisdom as well.

“I see. That said, the north is in a complicated spot lately. Are you looking to hear about migrations? Or get tips on hot goods? Currencies, perhaps?”

Lawrence of course wanted to know all of these, but that wasn’t his real objective. Flynn stared into his eyes, but turned away after a moment. Lawrence sighed.

“Currencies, huh.. on any other day, I guess I would..”

His answer eased the tension, and Flynn finally leaned forward to try again.

“You’d like to know where to avoid so you won’t get attacked, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would.”

“Really? That’s why you got Fran’s name, is it?”

Mercenaries needed money just like anyone else, and if Fran was desperate enough she might even let Lawrence use her name like this. Flynn was deadly serious, so Lawrence patiently sat

still and swallowed, knowing just how valuable information like that really was.

“Still..”

Flynn’s eyes glanced at the desk as he whispered, then swept across the room from Lawrence to Holo, then Cole. They seemed puzzled, and somehow impressed.

“..what is it?”

Lawrence was no longer able to hide how nervous he was. Flynn was just being too roundabout.

“These two can’t be normal if they’re really your companions.”

“Huh?”

Lawrence was shocked, but Holo laughed. Flynn joined her.

“Oh, am I wrong?”

“I am not that strong.”

Holo responded plainly to Flynn, whose face was turned to her despite eyeing Lawrence. It seemed those who dealt with mercenary bands could spot the true leader in a pack without a problem.

“Oh really? I cannot believe this! I have made a mistake!”

“’Tis to be expected of one who has been so busy of late.”

Holo smiled wide enough to show the whites of her teeth. Flynn smacked his forehead in surprise, which only confused Lawrence further. He looked over at Cole, but the boy just returned his confused stare.

“My my. We sure have a special guest today.”

Flynn coughed as Holo happily laughed. The situation still felt quite tenuous, but at least Flynn seemed satisfied.

“Well then. I think I’ll help you guys out after all.”

“Oh, uh, thank you.”

Lawrence reflexively replied before Holo could speak. Flynn smiled and nodded, obviously quite happy.

“But only on the condition that you tell no one what we discuss here. So? Where should we begin? Lots of mercenaries get hired by nobles, so if you bribe ‘em-”

“Diva Company.”

Flynn stopped and nodded at Lawrence’s interjection.

“I see.. But Diva can’t operate alone, so they must have the backing of some nobles. And the mercenaries they hire get my supplies. It’s a tight network we have. You could take advantage of that to learn about any number of companies in other towns. But then.. I do know what’s going on up north. I can tell you where it’s dangerous and where it’s safe.”

Holo could take no more, and Lawrence was finally able to relax as she took control of the conversation.

“I only wish to know about one place: Yoitsu.”

“Yoitsu?”

Flynn was just too good at talking in circles and repeating what others said.. now it seemed that tendency had finally come back to bite him. He sat in confusion for a moment before answering.

“Sorry, I don’t think I’ve heard of it. Is it from some ancient legend or something?”

“The Moon-Hunting Bear.”

“Oh yeah, that guy! A lot of mercenaries put him on their banners. So that place was one of the ones he destroyed, is it? Maybe I heard of it after all, but forgot. I talk to a lot of guys from the north after all.. Sorry, I wish I could be of more use to you.”

His apology was quickly met with a reply from Lawrence.

“In fact, Miss Fran is drawing us a map to Yoitsu. We will know its location soon enough.”

That caught him off-guard; his surprise was written on his face.

“She trusts you *that* much..?”

Lawrence just smiled and nodded as Flynn studied him even more carefully.

“Really? I haven’t even been able to get her to draw me a map.. and I want one. So.. any other questions?”

He was trying to be funny, so Lawrence turned his smile to Cole.

“Have you heard of a village named Pinault?”

It was Cole’s turn to be surprised. He’d always considered Holo’s village to be their most important priority, and had taken care to hide his concern for his own village. But Lawrence knew better, and also realized that Cole would never be able to afford asking such a question.. he had no way to pay anyone back, after all. The boy looked at him, stunned, until Flynn realized what was going on and happily answered.

“Ah, now *that* one I know. A few years ago the eastern Church sent their soldiers there and ran into a bunch of mercenaries. Good ones, mostly hunters. Lots of them became seasoned archers in that war. Having a strategic foothold is vital in the north, you see, and that’s the kind of place Pinault is. They’d never give it up, especially if it’s home to their friends. It’s safe for now.”

Flynn was speaking directly to Cole. He even intentionally used less jargon than he obviously wanted to. Cole was sitting so tall that when Flynn finally stopped, he slumped down with a sigh of relief.

“Heh.. I don’t know if that’s of any help to *you*, though.”

“Nah, thanks so much.”

Lawrence had to say something, because Cole seemed unable to find the words to say. Holo stood up and sat down next to him; her smile could comfort just about anyone when she wanted it to.

“Then let’s talk about Yoitsu again when you get your map.”

“I guess we really have no choice.”

“Hey, do you guys have a place to stay? The snow’s been light this year, so we’ve been hit hard by travelers. Finding a room might be tough.”

“Ah, I think we’ll be okay.. the Beast and Fish Tail recommended that we try Sister Eunice’s lodge.”

“Jeez.. you guys really aren’t your ordinary travelers.”

Flynn stroked his chin as he spoke, making Lawrence wonder if they were as lucky as he implied. He considered double-checking with Flynn just to play it safe, but saw a smile form on Flynn’s face before he could ask.

“Winning that waitress over sure isn’t easy.”

Lawrence had no idea why Flynn would bring her up, but Flynn just kept talking.

“That, and the guy managing Eunice’s has a real soft spot for that girl. If she’s sent you there he’ll probably kick someone out just to clear a room for you guys.”

Lawrence smiled in surprise. It seemed that waitress might even be more of a devil than Holo was.

“In fact I’m starting to feel pretty useless here.. even if you guys needed a room I might not be able to find you one.”

“Ah, no, you’ve actually helped us more than you think.”

Flynn smiled back at him with a smile gentle enough to make him pass as for real grocer.

“If you say so. Jeez, I really want a map too.. I wonder what I’d have to do before she’d make me one?”

Flynn’s face rested in his palms as he spoke. He seemed at first like the type you’d expect to just steal the map from them, but it turned out he wasn’t that way at all. He might actually be a more honest merchant than Lawrence gave him credit for.

“Alright, so you guys come back when you have that map.”

“Alright. Who knows.. we might even have some new questions for you by then.”

“Let’s hope so!”

Lawrence shook hands as the two of them stood up. Flynn then shook hands with Holo and Cole as well.

“Well, goodbye.”

Lawrence turned around after saying that, and just as he did, he heard a knock at the front door.

“Oh ho, what a busy day we’re having!”

“That’s only a good thing, for business.”

“True! I’ll be right down!!”

Flynn waved at Lawrence as he shouted at the door. Lawrence stood to one side of the door and opened it to let the next customer in; as he did..

“Ah!”

They gasped as a huge lump of a man rolled into the store. Flynn poured himself some more wine. Whoever the man was, he was tremendously portly, and was carrying a *lot* of goods on his back.

“..Mr. Lou Loah, I presume?”



Flynn used a jocular tone as he stared at the comical heap on the floor. He clearly had no intent on helping the man, so Lawrence took the liberty to lift him to his knees. He was covered in dust; he'd probably just wandered into town.

"Ah, ow.. Jeez, sorry.."

"It's alright. You okay?"

The man nodded in embarrassment at Lawrence's question, then keenly stood with the goods still on his back. He was huge, yet his goods were just as substantial as he was. For all his girth he certainly wasn't a weak man.

"Looks like another person with great timing."

"Huh?"

"You're here because of the rumors of war, yes? I'll wager those are all bibles, aren't they..? Well, sorry to say it, but anyone who wants 'em is already on their way north."

Lou Loah sat right back down on the floor when he heard that cruel truth. If he was a book dealer, then hearing it would have been like his worst nightmare coming true. Lawrence couldn't help but pity the man.. at least until he heard him shout out loud.

"Damn it, God! That's going to be a hell of a trip!"

Flynn watched as Lou shook his fists at the air like a little kid. Of course, it was justified, even if few people would have the stomach to act so pathetically. It was actually the kind of bumbling act that would endear him to others, so perhaps he was doing it on purpose. Even Lawrence heard himself chuckling.. at least until he noticed that Flynn was eyeing the doorway behind him.

The voice Lawrence heard next was grim.

"Damn your own greed before you damn God."

The voice belonged to a small body that came in after Lou. The very last kind of person one would expect to wander into a shop like this. A priestess. But even as Lawrence stared at her, frozen in shock, she finally took a look at him and froze as well. Her eyes didn't lose their sharpness for a second, however.

"Incredible.."

The feeling was mutual.

"No kidding.."

Lawrence cleared his throat and properly greeted the girl who had put him through a hell of a trip mere weeks ago.

“Long time no see, Miss Elsa.”

Her hair was dry, and her eyes doubly so. She was still the same girl he remembered, only thinner. But then, she wouldn’t be used to traveling, so that checked out. In stark contrast with her lack of personal care, however, her black frock was entirely free of any dust.

“What? You two know each other?”

Lou reacted like he was an audience member watching a troupe of actors.

“He helped our village not too long ago.”

“Oh ho!”

Lou’s mouth opened; he clearly didn’t care about concealing his act.

“Then you’re from Tereo village as well?”

He looked up at Lawrence, already shorter than him, but also leaning forward from the heavy load on his back.

“No.. I just happened to be passing by and gave them a hand.”

“Oh, I see.. then..”

Lou’s bumbling gesturing was so exaggerated that he could make anyone laugh. And yet, Lawrence couldn’t deduce if he was hiding anything. Many people with evil intents concealed their true character with just this kind of exaggerated buffoonery. Lawrence wasn’t so malicious that he would assume the worst of the man, of course, but that was no reason to be careless. He just smiled, until Flynn finally jumped into the conversation.

“Hey! This is a grocery store, not a pub! Go celebrate your reunion elsewhere!”

Lou slapped his forehead and looked at him apologetically.

“Ah, sorry.”

Elsa, on the other hand, had nothing to say. In fact, she really shouldn’t have anything to say to them. Even Holo seemed too tired to want to reveal just how irritated she must be right now.

“Don’t apologize to me, apologize to your companion! I’ll bet you just bumped in here without

even thinking about finding her a room first, didn't 'cha?"

Flynn really did seem to have a good heart deep down. Elsa maintained her poker face, but Lou nodded.

"Yeah, you're right. It's been a tough trip, I just figured we'd stop in since it was on our way."

Just then, Lawrence detected a cloud of worry pass over Flynn's face. And for good reason. If you aren't close with a shop owner, you wouldn't just stop in because it was on the way.. unless you were in trouble. And Lou looked every bit like the kind of guy trouble stalked on a daily basis.

"..You mind if we stay here for a couple days?"

Flynn heaved a great sigh, no longer able to conceal his vast irritation. Despite that, he seemed to be sighing deeply to buy time to choose his next words carefully.

"Definitely not."

He had no intent to cater to someone who was so rude, no matter how cruel that made him.

"Wait.. what? Don't be that way, Flynn! Even a small room is fine! We've been turned away by every inn! I'll sleep outside with my goods if I have to, but.."

He grabbed Elsa and pushed her forward like he was placing his last chip on the table.

"Don't ask *her* to do that!"

Elsa seemed just as irritated as Flynn. Clearly, Lou was just that kind of wily bastard. If he did this, refusing him wasn't an option. He knew just how unreasonable and rude he was, so he stooped to this kind of self-deprecating act. No one could turn the tired Elsa away to sleep outside; nothing less than a bed would do. She was clearly of the cloth, and had an air of respectability. Lou knew just how to take advantage of that. If Holo was a middle-aged man instead of a Wisewolf, she might end up just like him.

"I'm afraid my goods have spilled out of my storage rooms and are filling up every room in my place. I've even been forced to ask my employees to rest among the goods, and they're strapping young lads."

Flynn squinted and stared at Elsa.

"I wouldn't dare tempt fate by sending one of God's lambs to sleep among those guys."

It wasn't a threat, but Elsa noticeably shivered at the sound of it. Lou realized the jig was up, but he still put himself between them like he was defending her from a starving beast.

“I’ll do what I must, but she-”

“I’m not kidding. This is for her own good.”

“Oh, Lord.. can you ever forgive such a callous man?”

Lou now shouted impetuously, acting like he’d forgotten that he’d just damned God mere minutes ago. Flynn sighed again, and even Cole was standing there in shock. Holo was the only one who seemed thrilled by the spectacle of it all. Lawrence felt cornered; he had no choice but to jump in and offer his help.

“If you don’t mind the room where we’re staying..”

“What?!”

Holo instinctively shouted, suddenly just as upset as everyone else. But she quickly calmed herself, realizing just how badly it reflected on her. She covered her mouth hastily, but still stared at Lawrence with spite, obviously blaming him for everything. In contrast, Flynn sighed in great relief. He was off the hook. Cole, of course, was grinning happily, just glad they were going to help others. And Lou.. well, he looked at Lawrence like he was staring at his savior.

“Oh! Oh.. you’re a saint! May God bless you-”

He stopped short, however. Maybe he wasn’t quite sure how to properly praise Lawrence, but one way or the other it didn’t matter. He still ended up furiously shaking Lawrence’s hands until Elsa jumped in, having finally lost her temper.

“We have no means of paying you.”

She looked just as hostile as the first time she had met Lawrence. But Lawrence now knew just how hard her life was, and just how much she must feel she owed them already for their help in Tereo. She truly had no means to pay them - no money or valuables at all. And yet, that only made Lawrence want to help her more.

“But I’ll only be able to enter heaven by being kind now, won’t I?”

His challenge confused her for a moment, making her reply instinctively.

“Indeed, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a merchant to enter the gates of heaven.”

“Then what choice do I have *but* to shrink myself down, in preparation?”

Elsa cringed and glared at him uneasily. Living with a devout priestess like her was going to be a

burden on him. He wouldn't even be able to bring himself to eat normally with a frugal guest like her to entertain. She knew this. And she knew that Lawrence had already thought about it and still made his offer in good will. All she could do was morosely accept his kindness. She didn't realize, however, that Lawrence felt the same way about having Holo help him all the time.

"Of course, God made me this way, so I can't help but seek to profit, even if it's in the next life."

He knew Elsa wasn't going to miss his joke, and sure enough she quickly took his meaning and chuckled to herself softly.

"Then I have no choice but to accept your supposed kindness."

She clapped her hands together and raised them above her lowered head like a proper believer would. Someone else was heard clapping the same way, but no one had to look to know that it was Lou, acting as ecstatic as the master of ceremonies at a wedding.

"Whew, it looks like I can finally relax. Thank goodness."

"Then it looks like I've got no choice as well but to match such kindness. I should be able to spare room enough for you right here, Lou Loah."

Flynn pointed at his desk, clearly with the intent that Lou would sleep on it tonight.

"Of course, there'll be others in here as well, coming back drunk from the pub.. but I'm sure you'll be fine with that, won't you?"

"Of course I will! What a blessing! God be with you, Flynn.."

Even before he could finish, Flynn waved him away like he was shooing an annoying dog. But Lou didn't seem to mind. He just reminded Elsa that her luggage was still on a mule outside, and asked her to join him in fetching it. Lawrence and his companions also joined them after bidding Flynn a fleeting farewell. Holo's poker face hadn't changed for one second the entire time.

"Are you angry?"

It was clearly a loaded question.

"Of course not."

As anticipated, he received a loaded answer in response. Lawrence smiled at their familiar exchange, remembering having the same conversation when he asked Holo if they could travel with a certain shepherdess.

Back then, he mistook her anger as meaning that she wanted to travel with him alone, and when she divined the truth she mocked him for it. So why was she really angry this time? He couldn't help but look her in the eyes as they walked down the stairs, and felt compelled to ask again to make sure.

“Truly?”

Holo suddenly stopped on the last step, such that Cole plowed into her from behind before he could stop. She backed up into him to push him away, then took another step. Her eyes were on Lawrence the entire time.

“Look, I'm sorry.. eh?”

She forcefully took Cole's hand, even as she continued staring into Lawrence's eyes. She made sure to make a big show of holding Cole's hand tightly.

“Truly. I am not angry at all.”

Of course, the words she emphasized told the truth of the matter. She walked off with Cole, and Lou noticed them leaving. He looked up at Lawrence quizzically.

“They want to head back to our room and tidy up before we get there.”

It seemed that excuse was good enough. Lou nodded, seemingly impressed with their courtesy.

“How very kind of them.”

Elsa overheard them, and paused as she unloaded her luggage off the mule. Her eyes narrowed as she peeked at Lawrence.

“Really?”

Lawrence's heart skipped a beat, not expecting Elsa to have seen through them. She almost seemed amused by this. Just like how Fran had changed Cole, leading to his current deliberations, it seemed that Lawrence had changed Elsa as well. Then again, maybe she was finally just showing him the same kind of face she had always shown Evan, her own companion. But she cut off Lawrence's train of thought before he could arrive at a decision.

“I am ready.”

There was now a pile of her belongings beside the mule. It was so large that Lawrence wondered if he could handle it all. Elsa only lifted a small pack which probably contained her most treasured items; perhaps the letters of recommendation from regional nobles that ensured her position in the Church. Those could not be damaged under any circumstance. This was how a real woman of the cloth acted. He couldn't decide how different it was from the

pretend nun that Holo played.

“Shall we go, then?”

“Please.”

Elsa replied with her usual look of cold indifference.

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## Chapter 2

Cole's clothes were pathetically haggard. Their seams were torn. His coat had been re-stitched too many times to count. His pants barely covered his ankles. His shoes were thinner than slices of meat from the most miserly butcher. Not only that, but Cole himself was thin and frail-looking.. and not even by the Churches' standards of "honorable poverty."

Elsa was clearly exhausted. Yet despite her own clothes being no more luxurious than Cole's, somehow all she needed was to sit down to regain her energy. It seemed to be a by-product of her upbringing. Even so, she wouldn't abide sitting on the bed; a regular chair would do. Lawrence handed her a cup of milk with ginger and honey instead of wine.

She thanked Lawrence, of course, and didn't behave pompously in any way, but she still somehow managed to exude an air of dignity that separated her from the rest of them. Seeing her recover that air as she drank her milk made Lawrence breath a sigh of relief.

"So will you tell us why you left Tereo?"

Elsa wouldn't be bribed with offerings of food, but at least they served to soften her mood a little.

"I mean, I just can't figure it out."

He added this sentence as he poured himself some more wine, wanting to make it clear that his intent wasn't to pry. He was only curious, and making polite conversation.

"I'm looking for someone."

Her answer took him by surprise.

"Some.. one?"

"Not any specific person, mind you."

She closed her eyes as she sipped her milk, then sighed. Lawrence was used to watching Holo and Cole eat, so her eating manner seemed downright noble to his eyes.

"Someone.. who can enter the priesthood."

"But why?"

Before he could get any further, Elsa's eyes opened with a gentle smile.

“Because you have lit the fires of faith in Tereo. You even crushed Enberch’s evil plan with such amazing force that some of them are coming all the way to Tereo to buy cookies.”

She looked at Holo while saying “amazing force,” but Holo ignored her and chewed on jerky while looking out the window. She clearly knew Elsa was looking at her with gratitude, given how her ears subtly reacted. There was no need to conceal those ears from Elsa, of course.

“But the people from Enberch cannot understand why I am the only one in the church in Tereo. The Bishop’s lips are sealed thanks to us, but even he will have no choice but to talk eventually.”

The Church was a male-dominated institution, even if women participated in abbeys as nuns. But they weren’t priests. Elsa continued sipping her milk, trying to swallow her distaste of this fact, but she ended up choking on it.

“Ugh.. excuse me. In the end, I have to search for someone to become our priest. After all, I can hardly ask the Church to deal with this, can I?”

“So now you have to somehow find someone who’s a match for you, huh?”

Elsa smiled at the kind joke.

“Of course. My father, Father Franz, left the church to me. I cannot give it to just anyone.”

Father Franz was an impressive figure. He had raised Elsa on his own, and compiled many volumes about pagan beliefs and competing religions. His faith was always questioned, but he survived every attack. He even managed to somehow build a church in a village of pagans. It was sad that Elsa couldn’t succeed her father, but at least she could joke about it. She had a goal that was more important than her own feelings on the matter.

“That said.. it is not the only reason that I am traveling..”

Elsa’s eyes again turned to Holo, who met her gaze in confusion. Elsa smiled back at her gently, surprising Lawrence in turn.

“After that incident I realized how uneducated I truly am. I felt I needed to experience more of the real world.”

“Ah.”

That attitude was good enough for Holo, who was traveling with a similar motive, having dallied in wheat fields for centuries. She even had the luxury of being Elsa’s bona-fide “senior” in that regard, if she wanted to see it that way. Lawrence smiled with that thought as he looked back at Elsa.

“That’s never an easy thing to decide.”

Lawrence was a traveling merchant; he knew just how judgemental small villages were about the outside world. Some of the most remote villages even thought they were the last surviving people on the planet. Moreover, Elsa was a girl. God’s blessings couldn’t protect her against every ill she would face on the road.

As she contemplated Lawrence’s words, he noticed she was now wearing the Church’s emblem on a pendant around her neck. She hadn’t bothered doing so the last time they saw her in Tereo. It didn’t take much to guess that Evan, the brave miller in Tereo, had insisted that she wear it as she traveled.

“Of course, it hasn’t been easy. I’ve come close to giving up several times, but God has always seen me through it.”

Holo had grown to hate being praised as a God, but that didn’t mean she wanted to hear people talking about “God” in front of her. One of her ears turned when she heard that.

“You mean he led you to that book dealer?”

Elsa nodded.

“Yes.”

“What a strange fellow for you to come across.”

When he realized he had openly spoken his mind, Lawrence recoiled nervously, and Elsa laughed at the sight. She covered her mouth and apologized quietly before continuing.

“It’s hardly a big deal. I may have only met him once, but he knew Father Franz for a long time. Father’s letters recommended that I find him if I ran into trouble. If he trusted him that much, then I should also look past his greed and buffoonery.”

Lawrence had realized that Elsa wouldn’t be following Lou without reason, and her words confirmed that, but she spoke the words as though she really meant them for Lawrence instead of herself. He scratched his head, and she took a deep breath in preparation for a sermon.

“He does in fact worry me sometimes, but he is what he seems. Greedy, yes, but perhaps that is why he can also be so true to himself.”

It was quite an insightful observation, and helped lay Lawrence’s fears to rest.

“Should I assume he’s after Father Franz’s books, then?”

Elsa smiled.

“His kind doesn’t exist in the village, so when I first met him I was shocked. I simply couldn’t believe anyone would be that self-serving. He’s like the most devout of believers, in his own way. He’s tried every angle he can to get me to tell him about the books, but I have already experienced worse.”

She of course meant the time Holo and Lawrence had tricked Elsa into revealing the books to find Holo’s homeland. They had been far from noble, in fact, and took advantage of Elsa’s inability to lie in front of God. True to her faith, she tried her best to defy them, even when backed into a corner from which there was no escape. Lawrence still felt guilty about employing such trickery, and sheepishly glanced over at Holo.. but his co-conspirator showed no signs of caring.

“But the moment I told him I wanted to travel to Lenos, he happily agreed. It hasn’t been an easy trip. Any longer, and I might have broken and told him about the books, in fact.”

One’s first trip was full of things they had never encountered in their lives. Having someone to depend on just turned them into a mewling baby reaching out for their foster parent’s help. They would come to trust their guide implicitly, and even someone like Lou Loah might legitimately deserve that sort of privilege. He was an experienced merchant, after all.

“All great saints have left their homes and traveled into dark forests or deserts, and now I feel I can understand why. After traveling I see just how weak we humans truly are.”

That was a very common sentiment from members of the clergy. Lawrence smiled and nodded, and so did Cole.

“Now, I also understand something that I couldn’t wrap my mind around after you two left Tereo.”

That piqued Lawrence’s interest, and Holo along with him.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean why someone so powerful would humbly settle for traveling on a wagon.”

Lawrence had thought about this quite a few times as well. There was no doubt in his mind that he could be rich by now if he took advantage of Holo’s help. It would be trivial, in fact. But he never did. Even when danger surrounded him, he still tried to solve it without her special powers. Even she would get anxious sometimes. But he had his reasons, not the least of which was wanting to prove he was strong enough to be with her. That, and something a bit more personal.

“I see just how weak I am now, but if I just ask my friends for help, I will always be weak. I need

to make an effort to solve my own problems.”

It was embarrassing enough to have this topic raised that Lawrence glanced over at Holo for a moment before answering.

“All I have to do is ask, and she will willingly help me. But I shouldn’t take a bottle larger than I can carry. Not biting off more than you can chew is a rule that all merchants abide by.”

He thought for a second before finishing his speech.

“I know that when I break that rule, I’ll lose everything.”

Holo laughed.

“People always say how big the world is, and now I see just how true that is.”

She closed her eyes again after looking at her cup. It was true; she used to sparkle like a sharpened sword, but now she seemed broader and deeper. People couldn’t stop time and stay where they felt happiest. Holo had even cried about this the last time they were in Lenos. People changed. It was unavoidable.

But that didn’t mean that they had to change in sad ways. One could chose an optimistic route through life, like Lawrence and Holo had, and it seemed that Holo was thinking about that right now. She continued staring out the window with her ears drooped, like they always were when she was embarrassed (and would lead to her getting angry about it later).

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“I should thank God that I met the two of you again.”

Lawrence nodded in agreement with Elsa’s heartfelt assessment. People discovered friends as they traveled, not just life lessons. They might pine about the size of the world, and their own weaknesses, and the feeling of culture shock as they traveled, just like Elsa. But they also learned interesting new ideas, like Elsa was doing right now.

In front of her was a dish classified as a fish tail, no matter how much it resembled a chunk of meat. The clergy ate no meat; it was as natural to someone like Elsa as knowing not to breathe underwater. She could never have imagined that a backdoor like this existed, where she could wear gills for a moment. The look of discovery on her face was wholly satisfying to Lawrence.

“You need not take my word for it, milady, the bishops have made it nice and official in writing.”

The waitress was so lively and bubbly today that she talked with them even while she delivered beer to others. Usually, a pub became dead quiet the moment a member of the clergy entered.

But not here. No one paid any mind to Elsa, and just focused on relieving their exhaustion.

“Never.. mind. It’s a big world, after all.”

She stared at the fish tail in front of her before carefully slicing off a ridiculously tiny piece with her knife. She then chewed it like she was hoping to choke it down with all the other unpleasantries of the world. Even Holo and Cole were speechless. Only the waitress smiled in anticipation.

“Ooh.. wow..”

Elsa struggled for a long time before finally swallowing it. Her hands then searched for her cup, her eyes having closed long before. Cole put her juice in her hand, earning her thanks before she quickly drank it down like she was washing out her stomach. Was her initiation over? Lawrence worried how she would take this as he watched her put down her cup, frowning and squeezing out some words.

“So.. so spicy..”

Her face was red, and that included her eyes. For someone who lived in abstinence like Elsa, this kind of rich-tasting dish was like drinking liquor. It was excruciating.

“Mmhmm! It’s meant to be eaten with wine. Now try this.”

The Church had no problem with people drinking, so long as they did so in moderation. There was no shortage of bishops and priests who struggled with the “moderation” part, in fact. They just grew steadily fatter and fatter. There was even one physician called “the angel’s physician” who had a belly so large he had his desk cut so he could sit at it.

“What is this?”

“Buttered fried clams. They’re sent to us from the port downstream, shells and all. You can even eat ‘em raw if you wanna.”

Few people ate raw food unless they lived in frigid pagan lands. Lenos wasn’t far from Gerube (the port city the waitress was talking about) so some of their customs spilled over as well, including eating raw clams. Elsa’s eyes were round, as though she suspected it was a joke. That was precisely the way a girl her age should react, and Holo was so ecstatic to see that she would have whispered something to the waitress, had Lawrence not gently turned her face back.

“If this is too rich for you, just eat it with some bread. They serve good food here, but the bread..”

Before he could finish, the waitress slammed another dish on their table, and smiled at him.

“..the bread is a bit expensive.”

She nodded pleasantly when she heard his final wording, then ran back into the kitchen. Holo smiled too, as she covered her bread with baked beans.

“There really are so many different kinds of food outside.”

Their table was covered with meat, vegetables and shellfish of all kinds. There were steamed dishes, and cooked dishes. Strong and weak-tasting ones. Even the bread was new to Elsa. It was thinly cut, and used to wrap other foods. Forget Tereo, even Enberch didn't trade much with the outer world. They didn't really pay much attention to cuisine. That was how Lawrence had solved Tereo's financial crisis, after all.

“But you know, this shock only lasts a couple of days. Even I was overwhelmed the first time I left home. It was a challenge to get used to it all. But after a month, I'd seen practically everything.”

Someone like Lawrence would be bored with life by now, so he counted his blessings that he had met Holo. That kind of spice was what made life worth living. Elsa tried to smile at his reassuring words, but stopped the moment she saw Holo stuffing her face with her bread.

“Uh.. Um..”

Holo finished by sliding the last bean stuck on her face into her mouth with her thumb, then licked that thumb before proceeding to stuff the next dish in front of her into her face. Nothing else registered on her mind when she was enjoying a meal.

“Hmm?”

She opened her mouth when she finally realized Elsa was staring at her. But she only stopped for a moment before she continued stuffing her face. Lawrence was desperately trying to find a way to excuse her, but Elsa was too stunned to notice. She eventually dropped her gaze like she was trying to keep herself from saying anything.

Elsa picked up her own bread to politely tear it into bite-sized pieces. She paused, remembering Lawrence's words, and dipped it into the fish-tail sauce first before eating it that way. After that she paused again, making Lawrence worry that she was regretting it; the sauce was spicy, after all. He soon realized that she was in fact staring at Cole, whose own sauce-soaked bread was dripping everywhere as he devoured it without a care in the world.

“..”

Unlike Holo, however, Cole was very self-conscious. The moment he realized Elsa was staring at him, he reflected on his actions. His cheeks were stuffed, but his jaw wasn't moving anymore. Holo always giggled at how squirrel-like his eating habits were, and she shared her food with him almost like she was feeding a squirrel. His eating habits could hardly be called polite, but they were endearing in their own way.

"How.. unsightly.."

Lawrence burst out laughing, but Elsa wasn't kidding around. She had reached her limit. Cole had paused again in mid-bite at her scolding, and closed his mouth in embarrassment before staring at her, bread still in-hand. Holo just smiled and kept right on eating.

"You too!"

Holo was still Holo. She did pause at Elsa's words, but only long enough to raise her chin and look down on her before stuffing her face without a care in the world. Elsa sighed and shifted the blame onto Lawrence.

"You eat like thieves! At least that's what our village would think if they saw you people eating this way!"

Perhaps that alluded to how a thief would have to quickly stuff their faces before they were caught. Lawrence nodded earnestly, but Holo couldn't care less.

"I'm afraid that all travelers eventually lose their manners like this."

Elsa was taken aback. She was aware just how little she knew of the wider world, and that her own common sense wouldn't necessarily apply elsewhere. But this was just too much for her to handle.

Manners were just too ingrained in Elsa, it seemed. Holo's toying around with her innocence and righteousness wasn't helping things either. Lawrence rapped Holo's head to wipe the evil smirk off her face before trying to persuade Elsa again.

"I really am sorry, but that's just the way it is."

"..Oh, nevermind."

Elsa sat up straight in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. Lawrence joined her, but he stopped when she looked at him and closed her eyes. After a moment, she cleared her throat.

"I truly am grateful for your hospitality, being a poor village girl who cannot repay you. But at least I can offer you something in return.. that is, if you will accept it."

When her eyes reopened, she seemed quite happy at her revelation.

“Will you let me teach you proper table manners?”

Cole looked at her nervously, then at Lawrence. He acted like this was the first time anyone had scolded him over something like this. Certainly, it would be a worthwhile lesson for him to learn. He ate like a starving beast, after all.. and that was an overly kind description. Elsa flashed Cole a gentle smile, probably realizing how Lawrence felt.

“Don’t worry. You wouldn’t be the first to struggle with it, even a certain villager I know can’t get it through his thick skull. I’m sure you can do it, if you put your mind to it.”

Lawrence realized she was talking about Evan, who’s resistance to her lessons infuriated her. Holo also seemed to be in agreement that Cole could stand to learn a thing or two, but Elsa read her mind and repeated her earlier statement to her.

“You too.”

“How dare you? Who do you think I am..?”

“No one gets special treatment. It shouldn’t be any trouble for you, though, so you really have no excuse.”

Holo was quite good at playing the spoiled princess. In fact, she’d earned her share of detractors for it. Elsa knew her character, however, so Holo had no recourse but to turn away, pouting.

“Even wonderful dishes like these will taste better if you eat them properly.”

Elsa beamed them the kind of smile only a member of the clergy could. It was the same type of smile Fran used when she was serious; but it was entirely Elsa’s own. Fran had survived a harsh, bloody life with only friendship and her bible. Elsa really didn’t have much more; just a dim-witted miller for company. They were like similar seeds that had bloomed in different soil.

“Oh, really..”

Cole shot Lawrence a glance. Holo, being a wolf, could care less, but Cole was a human who wanted to learn Church law and become a clergyman. Manners were something he should learn. Lawrence nodded in approval, and Cole put on an expression like he had just missed the carriage he was supposed to ride on.

Everyone reacted differently, and those reactions were how you could judge their character. There were people who gave up immediately, and people who kept walking no matter how many times they had their feet kicked out from under them. Cole was the latter type, and he nodded despite his nervousness.

“Please.. please teach me.”

“Very well then.”

Elsa smiled benevolently, and Holo quickly drank her wine. Elsa’s lesson was quite sensible and typical, actually. Don’t eat too quickly, don’t eat too much, don’t drop any scraps, don’t make any noises, move the food to your mouth and not the other way around, and so forth. But this was all completely new to Cole.

For Cole, meals were like competitions for survival. He had to stuff his face as quickly as he could. There was so little food to begin with that there was no such thing as a “scrap.” Talking was only detrimental, so focusing on the sounds he made was pointless. Even washing and drying his hands before a meal just meant others would have already devoured most of the meal.

In fact, Cole had only started to eat more sensibly after he met Lawrence. He no longer had to compete to fill his belly. He could relax. He was able to try so many foods for the first time in his life. In fact, he seemed lost in thought right now, and sat up to murmur to Lawrence.

“You know, now that I met you guys, I eat so slowly that my food even goes cold before I eat it sometimes. But I was already used to eating cold food, so I never really noticed it before.”

That wasn’t the simple realization of a child, either. A wandering student like him wouldn’t eat many warm meals; he had to arouse sympathy in others just to be fed at all. Lawrence couldn’t help but put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and reply.

“But now you can even share your food with others. It tastes good that way, even if it’s cold, doesn’t it?”

Lawrence had also experienced similar hardships when he was starting out, and yet now he could sincerely say something like that with a straight face. He felt odd to have come so far that he was able to say it at all. Before he met Holo he viewed meals as a necessary source of nutrition, and little else. Now they were outright entertainment.

Having a companion to eat with made it possible to enjoy even the coldest and least palatable foods. In a word, it was fun. Cole seemed to have understood that as well. He was nodding like he had just learned some great secret of the world.

“And if you’re still not convinced this is worthwhile, just think of it as a free lesson.”

He flashed the boy a sly smile.

“Right!”

Cole's spirited reply was followed by him running after Elsa, who had already left the pub. Cole was always enthusiastic about learning. He'd probably study what he learned from Elsa like he was attending classes. Holo, on the other hand, was so frustrated that she lay flat on the table as Lawrence paid for their meal.

"As long as he learns something, it will be worthwhile."

The coins he got back for change had images of rabbits on them, probably because rabbits were such an important staple up north. He tossed a coin playfully into the air, and Holo's hand reached out to grab it.

"I am just a beast anyway."

He suspected she was joking, and was about to fire a joke back at her before he realized she was being serious. He forced his mouth shut.

"His smile is the most important, after all."

If she was the kind to force her ways onto others, she wouldn't have had to leave Pasloe in self-exile, forgotten. But she believed that life was happiest when one lived freely, even if she seemed powerful enough that people would obey her.

She really was better-suited to a relaxed life, as Lawrence had realized after traveling with her for so long. He could picture her staring at the swaying ears of wheat day in and day out, serene and beautiful, just like her. But that wasn't the way the world truly was.

"Cole's just at that age where his curiosity is boundless. Learning is just too exciting for him."

He thought it was a lovely sentiment, but Holo clearly didn't. Her hand hit his shoulder and she pouted before they headed out to Cole and Elsa, who were waiting for them. As they walked back together, Lawrence wondered if Cole and Elsa would have as many common interests as it seemed they should; they seemed so happy walking together.

"I'm afraid it looks like your toy has been taken from you."

Lawrence felt like being the malicious one for once, and Holo indeed nodded like a little kid who had her toy taken from her. She was just too honest for her own good at times like this, and Lawrence had to force himself to smile so he wouldn't get depressed as well.

"Geez, if this is how you react if Cole is snatched away, I shudder to think how you would be if I was snatched away too."

She was just too easy to attack when she let her guard down like this.

"Fool. I am a Wisewolf."

If only she acted like this a little more often, she would be even more beautiful. He was holding her hand before he realized it, marvelling about how much warmer it seemed than usual.

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Lawrence woke up the next morning when he heard the door to their room being closed. He'd been drifting in and out of consciousness anyway, so he sat up and was once again hit by a wave of loneliness. If his bleary memories could be trusted, that meant the others were off to another mass.

He yawned, hesitating over whether he might as well just plop back into bed. Traveling to Lenos wasn't particularly difficult, but the nights were rough. A bed this comfortable was a godsend. He hadn't felt anything like this lately, not in the snowy Winfield Kingdom, nor in the hut they had slept in in the mountains.

Elsa was probably feeling the same way, having never stayed in such a fine inn. They hadn't been given any time to prepare anything but a makeshift bed for her, but she already seemed to think that was the height of luxury.

She even joked about it being more comfortable than the elder's bed in Tereo. And yet, given how she fell asleep the moment her head touched her pillow, it might not have actually even been a joke. Not even Holo could fall asleep that quickly. In fact, Holo was so shocked that she hopped up and shook Elsa to confirm that she was really asleep.

Despite her strict demeanor, Elsa was a compassionate girl. Only her enemies would find it difficult to see that compassion. She didn't treat Cole the way Holo did, like a lost puppy. Nor did she go out of her way to make people uneasy, like Fran did.

Lawrence wouldn't be surprised if Holo had joined them just to make sure Cole wasn't stolen from her. For all her protests that she didn't care, she had to. Her displeasure was so clear that the more she acted like some proper Wisewolf should, the more amusingly obvious it was.

Lawrence felt such pride and happiness that Holo confided in him that he was afraid she would tease him for it. But right now, he was alone and could afford to drop his guard. He yawned through his smile, and rolled his head to work the kinks out of his neck before he stood up.

He had business to attend to. He couldn't forget his other companion in the stables, nor could he avoid the need to buy provisions for the next leg of their trip. He had to order provisions as early as possible, in fact. They were probably already out of stock, on account of how many travelers were in Lenos lately.

It might take several days just for an order to come in. Even the inns were all full, and running out of their own stock. Merchants were always on the ball when it came to such things, so at

least he could take solace at that fact. He then proved that point by quickly rinsing his face and letting the innkeeper know he was leaving. He was gone in a flash.

It had been quite a long time since he was left to his own devices when he went shopping. He felt so at ease and so happy that he could only chalk it up to the morning air being so pleasantly fresh. He knew the sun would inevitably set just as it had risen, of course, and that personal space was only important when it was being invaded, but right now he could breathe the same white breaths of air and walk just as merrily as the other bright people on the streets.

The market was downright crowded; both in the buildings and out on the streets. Mules and horses carried goods on their backs, and people also carried yokes with buckets of vinegar that choked them. Some guards were keeping watch around a wagon loaded with salt, and wily children followed closely to snatch up whatever dripped off the wagon. They could make some coin for it, and the guards really had no reason to complain; they had a job partly because of those kids. Everybody won.

Lawrence's thoughts turned to Eve, who was on her way south with a boatload of furs. He wasn't thinking of her in admiration, of course, it was merely business respect, but when he caught himself doing so he snorted and decided it was time to start shopping. There were so many people to buy from that he was sure to fetch a good price for what he needed if he took his time.

He was splashed as he walked by the fishmongers, and hit by the pungent smell of cheese soon after. Cheese didn't spoil easily, and filled the stomach well, so it was already good even without his trick of melting it and using it as a dip for stale bread.

He was far from the first person to do that, of course, it was common practice down south. But here in the cold north, it was even more of a guilty pleasure. Especially since he got to watch Cole and Holo nervously trying to eat it as soon as possible without burning their tongues. With that in mind, he entered the shop and quickly spotted the owner pushing a crate. He rubbed his face to wipe the stupid grin off of it before shouting to the man.

"Pardon me, how much for a wheel of cheese?"

This shop didn't seem to bother with price tags. Maybe they just had too many visitors speaking foreign languages to cater to. At first the shepherd-like merchant seemed confused by Lawrence's question.

"I mean like that one right there."

Lawrence pointed at the wheel about to be weighed, as the man's young apprenticed struggled to keep it steady with a red face.

"Oh.. did you just arrive in the last day or two?"

He eventually replied like an elderly man with poor hearing might, before signalling to the young lad to let the cheese go. The scales in a cheese shop were as large as the ones in bakeries, but the support beams were even thicker. The chain was plain enough to make it clear that it saw plenty of use and needed no decoration. The scale plunged as the cheese hit the balance, and as it did Lawrence made his reply.

“Yes, I arrived two days ago. I’m just stopping here before I head up north.”

The shopkeeper left before Lawrence even finished, grabbing a branding rod. Lawrence paused and waited for him, getting a good look at the brand etched onto the rod. The man placed that end into a metal bucket, obviously filled with heated charcoal, and then lifted it up to finish his task.

“I see. That’s unfortunate.”

The smell of burning cheese hit Lawrence’s nose.

“You see, it’s not that I’m too lazy to put price tags on these, they’re all purchased already.”

“What?”

Again, the man preempted Lawrence before he could even voice his exasperation.

“This one, all of those, and even everything else coming in today is already accounted-for. It’s nice to have a rush like this, but it’s almost too much for me. Especially when I have to turn away so many sad-faced customers.”

Lawrence put on a twisted forced smile, but it wasn’t out of embarrassment.

“Well, at least business is good again.”

Mere weeks ago, all the merchants in town were wringing their hands in worry about the fur situation and the cancellation of the Great Northern March.. not to mention the heavy taxes being levied at the time.

“Yeah.. business is so good all of a sudden. It’s like we’ve been hit by good weather, given how wide everyone’s suddenly willing to open their wallets. Weird, huh?”

Some cheese aged well, and it seemed like this shopkeeper was the same way. He was relaxed even as he worked. It made Lawrence hope that he would be so easy going when he got that old.

“Yeah, it sure is.. hey, does that mean that even tomorrow’s cheese - and the day after’s - are already accounted-for?”

The man gave a heavy nod. Incredible.. Lawrence might be in more trouble than he realized. He knocked his head, until the shopkeeper spoke up.

“But hey, our cheese goes good with wine, so you’ll probably find a lot of it in the local taverns.”

“Wha-?”

Lawrence’s expression of surprise was ignored; the man was too busy barking orders at his apprentice. But it was all too obvious that he was suggesting that Lawrence try buying some from the local taverns.. something he really shouldn’t be saying out loud.

Cheese merchants sold cheese, taverns sold dinner and wine. What would taverners say if they caught this shop selling people dinner? It just wasn’t the kind of thing one said out loud. Clearly, the man was going out of his way for his customers, by giving such advice out loud.

“Thanks.. I’ll go there tonight.”

“Hmm, your call. Oh, by the way.. you’ll probably have trouble getting much of anything, unless you hop over to the docks.”

The man then disappeared the moment Lawrence nodded in understanding. It was another bit of strangely-loud advice, and it implied that that everyone was running low on stock, and only scraps were left. Plus, prices must not be rising if the man felt comfortable saying something like that, so maybe the riot over the fur situation in Lenos was having strange side-effects after all.

A market this lively was hell for a merchant like Lawrence. He ducked into an alley the second he left the cheese shop, having decided to head straight to the Beast and Fish Tail. When he got there, he spotted a wagon parked outside, with several buckets and crates already on it.

There was also a familiar waitress, busily counting those buckets and crates with a tinge of annoyance on her face. What a hard-working girl. Lawrence patiently let her count, as the kid next to her happily kept apologizing. She wore a bewitching smile on her face, but quickly wiped it off the moment she saw him walk up to her, like she had read his mind.

“Oh, you’re early today.”

She was cool as a cucumber, like she’d already forgotten her last customer. Or maybe she was being tough because she’d lost to Holo the last time?

“Better than being late, I’ll wager.”

She carved something onto a wooden plaque as they spoke, but sighed and looked at him like

she was getting stiffed by a drunk.

“So what business are you here to discuss this time?”

She sounded clearly annoyed, but Lawrence still put on a smile.

“Discuss? Well, I’d like to buy some things.”

The look on her face was exactly what you’d see if you looked at the picture next to the definition of the word “surprise” in a dictionary. Even her eyebrow was raised.

“Pubs aren’t shops. You know that. Hop on down to the market, we’re busy.”

Having finished counting, she tucked the wooden plaque under her arm and barked at someone in the shop. There were a lot of crates here, and she couldn’t move them all herself. She was probably calling for the owner’s assistance.

“No kidding, you must be if you’re cooking all of this.”

Her back faced him and the road, and he could swear that if she had a rabbit’s tail it would be bobbing up and down impatiently right now. She stared at him with clear displeasure in her eyes.

“These are emergency supplies.”

“But of course.”

He smiled as she turned away and scratched her head, not knowing what to say.

“I have cash. I can pay in gold coins, or..”

He didn’t usually start with gold.

“Smaller change, if you prefer?”

She heaved a great sigh.

“Alright, alright, I get it. As soon as you figure things out, you hop on over here. I just can’t figure you out.”

She stared at the sky like she was at her wit’s end. Her exaggerated manner was rather hilarious; Lawrence fancied she could easily make a living as a dancer if the pub were to close someday.

“Cash talks louder than anyone.”

The girl nodded.

“Still, these are just emergency supplies.”

Just then, the owner came bounding out the door, just in time to catch Lawrence repeating himself.

“But of course.”

Lenos had been a total mess not too long ago, and even if everyone was getting used to it, things were different now. So different that even the way people did business was twisted. Lawrence remembered how it was the last time he was here with Holo, and the strange situation he was swept into by Eve, a brilliant fallen noble who wanted to trade in fur. It was still fresh on his mind.

The town council of Lenos had then made the decision that traveling merchants could only buy fur with cash. Raw furs were cheap, but once processed into clothing they became highly lucrative. But if they tried to simply ban the sale of furs to traveling merchants, there would be an armed revolt. Their only recourse to please the Church was to force traveling merchants to pay in cash.

Of course, traveling merchants didn't travel with much cash, so it was an obvious ploy. The furs were sitting there right in front of them, but they couldn't pay for them as they always had. It seemed a watertight plan, but it was no secret that the Church was the only party that would have a lot of cash on hand, given how much they made in donations.

The Church was obviously in cahoots with the town council on this one. Everyone else was enraged, and a riot broke out. The only way to quell it was for the furs to be sold out, and of course that meant that all the cash in town would be pooled in the hands of a few fur dealers. In a situation like that, the value of hard cash would quickly skyrocket.

“Ever since that riot, cash is nowhere to be found. It's like its vanished. We can trade goods to buy things, of course, but what'll we do without change for our customers! It's a disaster.”

The girl vented her frustrations as they entered the pub's cellar. Sure enough, they were well-stocked with goods fresh from the market.

“Even coins go up in price when they get scarce.”

“They're all in the greedy paws of the fur merchants now. But that's not even the worst of it. Even the fur merchants don't have much small change. Even the dullest copper coin seems as shiny as gold right now.”

At a time like this, it was the common folk who won. They could only save up small change, and they were far too practical to invest. As soon as they got the chance, they ran out and bought everything in sight before the coins depreciated in value. Of course that was why no one had anything in stock anymore.

“And who better than a pub to seize the profit from just such an occasion, huh?”

Lawrence scribbled his offer on a piece of wood and handed it to the waitress. But she immediately frowned and altered his offer for him.

“Jeez.. why don’t you just rob me while you’re at it.”

“You’re free to just head on down to the market like everyone else.”

Who better than a pub waitress to know how to deal with merchants, after bargaining with their drunk carcasses every night? It wasn’t as though they needed to sell to Lawrence, after all. This was all regular stock for a pub, and they could just as easily sell them at high profit during normal business hours.

“Sure, but for this price you’d better be giving me the very best of your stock.”

“Hmm, then I suppose we can still come to a deal.”

Her look of satisfaction made it painfully clear just how cheaply they had bought all of these goods. A crafty, daring, and rich opponent was the worst kind.

“But even so, this is way beyond my expectations.”

“What do you mean?”

The girl was closing the door behind them, so Lawrence ended up asking her back.

“I really didn’t expect you to come on your own.”

“I always do business alone.”

Her index finger rested against her chin as she murmured to herself.

“That’s right, you do..”

“A certain companion of mine once said that’s the only reason some uncut gems are discovered.”

The girl’s smile was as bright as a polished gem when she heard this.

“Alright, so I’ll have these sent to you over the next few days.”

“Very good. Thanks.”

“But it’ll be just before noon, okay? We’re a pub, so we can’t be seen doing business too early.”

She was clearly painting a specific picture for Lawrence; after all, what could keep a morning person like her in bed until noon?

“Right, we can’t be too early or late, can we?”

“We certainly can’t have bad timing.”

Hearing someone else mention bad timing made Lawrence remember the other question he wanted to ask.

“Oh right, has that letter I mentioned arrived yet?”

“Speaking of bad timing, no, I’m afraid not. Though since you want it that badly, I’ll have it sent the moment it arrives, okay?”

“I appreciate it.”

And that was that. There were no sad eyes following his back as he left. The girl didn’t even look at him, she just waved the wooden plate in her hand. Farewells were even more frequent for waitresses than they were for traveling merchants. It was a big world, after all.

“Well, what’s next?”

He was talking to himself, still surprised it had taken so long to buy provisions. He’d wanted to visit the stables afterward, but knew better than to leave Holo sitting in their room with a grumbling stomach. With a sigh, he decided to run back and check up on her.

He rushed into an alley off the crowded road, and had to slam into a wall to avoid some ladies carrying baskets on their heads. He received no thanks, but at least won a smile. Maybe that waitress wasn’t bewitching anyone after all; such smiles might just be a Lenos custom. He made his way through the alley wondering about that, until he finally came to the next open road.

This time he didn’t stop because he saw a wagon, but rather a familiar building.

“Yup.. It’s definitely closed..”

It was the inn Lawrence had stayed at on several occasions, the one previously owned by Arold before he left on his “pilgrimage to the south.” It had in fact been a leatherwork factory once, until Arold turned it into an inn. What had previously been a factory floor was now a vast

storehouse rented out to others, and what were once living quarters for factory workers were now rooms for travelers.

The rights had been transferred to Delink Company, in exchange for Holo's freedom, but Lawrence couldn't imagine Delink running an inn. He figured they must have resold the deed, and the once-again-empty building would be repurposed for something else altogether. Lawrence couldn't tell what just yet, but knowing Delink it was probably better that he didn't know.

He smiled and wondered what kind of shop he might have turned it into if he had stayed in Lenos. It wouldn't be quite as notorious as Flynn's grocery store, but Lawrence was sure he could have turned it into a nice depot for traveling merchants like himself. With a good woman to share that fortune with, he could have been happy.

"..as if."

He sighed in self-mockery and turned away. He probably wasn't the only one sighing to himself like that, now that their trip was nearly over. Holo was just as good at keeping her thoughts to herself, after all.

But now that his thoughts had returned to her, he'd better get a move on before Holo got upset with his dallying. Besides, he couldn't hope to fool her nose so he had to keep clean. He kicked his wistfulness to the curb and tried to lift his spirits. But that was before he noticed who was coming out of the closed inn.

"Oh?"

That someone was looking straight at him now, keeping their jaw from dropping. At least, that's how it seemed to Lawrence, who was just as surprised. It was the proprietor of Delink Company, Luz Eringin himself, the man who had accepted Holo as collateral for a loan.

"You think it'll be alright?"

His voice certainly hadn't changed; it was still as oily as a snake's skin. But at least it wasn't directed at Lawrence just yet. He turned to face the other man who was also leaving the old inn with him.

"Yes, although there's still the leftovers to take care of."

"The previous owner said we could do what we wished with those."

"So he's transferred the risk to us, has he? They're probably smuggled. We should have them checked first."

The other man was likely one of the town guards, who were liable to transfer the rights to seized or unclaimed goods to companies like Delink.

“You’re heading back to the firm, then? You’re always welcome to visit my place, I just got ahold of a nice vintage..”

Everyone wanted to befriend the guards, but they only wanted to make friends with influential men like Eringin. Watching this exchange made it clear to Lawrence just how influential Delink was in Lenos.. even if the man was refused.

“No thanks. I really have to get back, I have urgent business to attend to today. Sorry.”

Lawrence wondered if he was talking about him. The guard seemed to as well, at least at first. But he lost interest quickly, and headed off. As he disappeared around a corner, Eringin finally spoke up.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Kraft Lawrence. I never thought I’d see you again so soon.”

“To be honest I never suspected I’d see you again at all. Guess life had other plans.”

Eve might have the heart to deal with a man like him again, but not Lawrence.

“Guess not everyone has ambition to match their success.”

“I’d be happy enough with just the success part.”

Eringin flashed Lawrence a smile. One might even mistake him for a kindly aging gentleman if they didn’t know better. He tilted his head and replied.

“Well, you’re always welcome to come visit us. Recently, we even got hold of a nice vintage..”

He deliberately echoed the guard’s own words. Even Eringin’s eyes looked like golden snake eyes when he smiled. It was a horrible sight.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

Eringin took his leave, and the long sleeves of his coat dangled behind him. He wore a fur scarf and luxurious boots, looking sharp despite no one being there to accompany him. It felt strange to not see attendants following him, but only if you didn’t know his business. He would have enough loneliness to match his pomp in that line of work.

“I hope my loneliness won’t turn me that evil in the end.”

Bravery wasn’t enough to help one overcome their loneliness; there many famous legends and stories about just that topic. Even Holo was no stranger to loneliness, proving just how little

power helped in the matter. Despite all of this, Lawrence had to respect Eringin.

“I should really get going too..”

But the moment he turned to leave, he found himself turning back. Was someone watching him? He couldn't see anyone, but he couldn't shake the feeling either. Maybe he was just too worried about Holo for his own good.

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Oddly enough, his concerns about Holo were warranted. The moment Lawrence returned, he was greeted with a severe scowl. She had been limited to rye bread, cheese, and a small portion of beans for breakfast. It was pretty much the breakfast of every traveler out there, but she wasn't limiting herself to it out of some desire to experience hardships. It was Elsa's idea.

“It is not enough!!”

Holo voiced her complaint rather loudly. Thankfully, the wagons around her obscured her ranting, but that didn't help her mood in the slightest. Two obvious points were sticking up from her hood, where her ears must be. The back of her robe was also billowing behind her, obviously held aloft by an angry-looking tail.

“Well.. at least this way you won't get completely spoiled..”

If her eyes could burn him just then, they would have.

“Are *you* going to lecture me as well?!”

“N-no.. jeez, calm down..”

She swallowed whatever else she wanted to say and spun around unhappily. It seemed that Elsa had been busily lecturing Cole about the Bible when Lawrence came back, and unlike Fran (who was a military chaplain) Elsa wasn't just out to offer comfort to the dying and embolden the troops. She wasn't the type that mercenaries often referred to as “God's reapers.”

Elsa was the type that overwhelmed others with religion, like it was a war she fought for constantly. God's word was everything to her. That was perfect for someone like Cole, who wanted to study Church law but was too poor to attend formal studies. Even Lawrence felt it was a cozy arrangement for the boy.

But for Holo, it was a different story. She had her dignity as a majestic Wisewolf to maintain. Of course she wouldn't keep Cole from his ambitions, either, so all she could do was watch and listen. Even after the morning mass, she was stuck sitting with Elsa and Cole, like a solemn statue.

Holo could deal with the feistiest bar waitress, but not someone like Elsa. Elsa had no designs on Cole, nor any real ulterior motives. All Holo could do was silently mope there, tortured by the ordeal. And now, it was Lawrence's turn - he became a bag of sand for her to scream at.

"She drones on and on like she knows what she is talking about. On and on to Cole, even while we walked to and from the Church. Acting like it was God who saved her village. Right next to me, no less!"

Now Holo was droning on and on, no matter how little sense she was making. She just wanted to list her grievances while Lawrence casually agreed. He could stare at the scenery for all she cared, so long as he nodded.

"She waltzes into *my* lair and throws it into disarray, like some horrible storm! All because of you! You just *had* to let her in, didn't you!"

She stood on her toes like she was about to jump up and bite his face. It even made him step back in surprise.

"Yeah.. I did.."

He hesitated, not knowing what else to say, then gave up entirely. Anything he said now would just fan the flames of her wrath anyway. Holo didn't normally get this angry. Especially not over something like Cole talking to another girl. But then, he had been keeping his thoughts to himself ever since they left Gerube. And just yesterday, he dragged Holo to mass with him, returning like he was a new man.

Holo had initially been happy. She claimed that was how to act when a fun trip was coming to an end, but she was really happy that Cole was with her. Now, with Elsa in the picture, she was at her wit's end. Lawrence knew better, but there was no way he could suppress a chuckle. That earned him an immediate glare.

"You think it is funny?!"

She bared her fangs, making it clear that she meant business. He would have been terrified right now if the two of them had just met, but he was even able to joke about it now.

"I can't help it.."

He pulled her arm to keep her from running headlong into a wagon as she stared him down.

"I never thought the Wisewolf could be like this."

She swung her arm, trying to free herself from his grip, but he just held her tighter to keep their hands joined.

“Hey, sorry, don’t get angry.”

It was useless to say that, of course. Sure enough, her arm began flailing even more wildly like some stubborn child. He finally let her go when it looked like she would actually bite him, placing his hand on top of her head instead.

“I wasn’t making fun of you.”

His hand was flung off a moment later, so he repeated himself.

“I wasn’t making fun of you.”

They were finally at the docks. As the space opened up around them, they could see workers resting as they ate their lunches. Crates were piled high all around them as they enjoyed their moment of respite.

“So?”

Holo didn’t even know why she was angry. She just was. True, Cole had been taken away from her. But it shouldn’t bother her this much. She was acting like someone had snatched her apple. She would normally just accept that if she did her best to get him back and failed, that was just how it was. The Wisewolf knew how easily things came and went, and carried herself like a proud, albeit lonely, traveler.

That wasn’t just Lawrence’s image of Holo, either. He knew the only reason she was still with him was because he had forced the issue in the most unsightly way possible. Holo naturally shrank back from relationships, thinking it was the wisest and most noble way to handle things. And for all her wisdom, she just might be right about that.

Yet that didn’t mean she *wanted* to be lonely. It wasn’t that she *wanted* to shy away from a relationship. She was even willing to drop her mask in front of Lawrence, like she had a moment ago, in the hopes that he would bravely come to her emotional rescue.

“You know, you don’t have to force yourself to act like a Wisewolf if you don’t want to.”

He kept staring at the port, even if she was quietly staring at him. She knew that already, of course, but to her it must have felt like she had let slip some dark secret of hers. She hated herself for it.

“It just sounds so stupid! Me, wanting to get Cole back!”

She pouted and turned away, finally realizing why she was really angry. But her ears and tail always told more of the story than her mouth ever would. Lawrence had to press on.

“But even *you* want to be willful once in a while, don’t you?”

Holo shivered in surprise. She was really concerned about her image. She was one of those people who couldn't afford to show any signs of tarnish. She might claim that she craved no praise, but if she genuinely received none she would be lonely. It went against her need to save face.

She loved making sport of others, but she was also quite hard on herself. She was a kindly and loyal wolf, after all. Even when the village she was protecting became openly hostile, she remained loyal to them. She had watched over them for centuries, kindly, responsibly, and all in spite of the fact that she hated being alone.

People like Holo always fell into traps of their own devising.

“Look, no one will blame you for being jealous and possessive. We're all like that. You're not stuck all alone in a wheat field anymore, being forced to act like a god.”

He took a short breath and finished his thought.

“So just don't force yourself, alright? I won't force you either.”

He'd seen Holo's willful side before, and didn't mind it. It wasn't as if she had an image that badly needed maintenance. He knew that she was still trapped in the past in that regard. She was already quite honest with him now, and had made her share of mistakes in the past before she met him.

He might not be good for much, but he could at least encourage her and push her to take the first step, and be there in case she stumbled.

“So please don't treat me like I'm just a bag of sand. I'm happy to help you face your feelings, you know? I'd like to think that's what a proper Wisewolf would do.”

He was actually trying to joke around a bit, but he stopped the moment he realized she was pulling her hood down over her face. Her head lowered and her shoulders trembled.

“Uh..”

She was stubborn, and treasured her honor, but deep down she was gentle and soft. Clearly she'd already considered such things on her own. Is that why she was acting embarrassed now? Had he miscalculated that badly, and ended up only hurting her feelings more by repeating what she already knew?

A cold sweat ran down his back and he froze in silence. He suddenly realized they were in public, and felt horrified that others might have been watching as he cradled her in his arms. He finally peeked at her face, and realized she had been waiting for him to do just that.

“What happened? You were so brilliant just now, then stumbled over something so trivial..”

He could stand up to her anger, but not her tears. He was no different from most men in that regard. The moment she was genuinely unhappy, he was left wide open to her attack.

“Well..”

She pushed him away and walked ahead. He could only dumbly stumble after her.

“I do not need you to teach me such things.”

He struggled to find the words he squeezed out in response.

“..then why are you doing all of this?”

“Why?”

She paused again and turned to look him in the eyes before repeating herself. He had no idea what to do, so he just watched her step back to him while repeating her question.

“Do you believe I can just do whatever I wish? That I can give up the honor and wisdom of being a Wisewolf?”

She was directly challenging him. Her red eyes shone dryly from under her hood like top-quality wine.

“You feel you can just read my mind, do you? You can just follow me for a while, and say such things like they are easy? Well they are not. And..”

She looked away.

“..You are only saying this because you wish for your own life to be easier, anyway.”

Now it was Lawrence’s turn to be angry. It had taken a lot for him to speak just that much of his mind. Why wouldn’t she just drop the mantle of the Wisewolf, if it only served to hurt her so? He just didn’t understand. Especially when it began hurting him as well. Before he knew it, he had grabbed her arm.

“Is that what you really think?”

She stared right back, and he could see his own face reflected in her eyes.

“Then I am wrong?”

She wasn’t joking or trying to snare him in some trap. She wasn’t just playing around, even if

she wasn't really suspecting him. She just needed to hear him say it.

"Of course!"

He would leave no room for argument, and stared right back at her eyes to make it clear that she could look right into his soul if she doubted him. Her eyes slowly closed, as they always did when she lowered her defenses to go to sleep. This was just like the times she fell asleep to his boring idle conversations. The moment he realized that, her eyes shot back open and she laughed.

"How daring can you be.."

"What?"

"Asking me to be straight as an arrow when you can't be yourself."

She just averted her eyes with a happy smile.

"Just like you did to me a moment ago.."

The evil sheen in her eyes was back.

"Argh!"

The scene in Lawrence's mind was of Elsa, a careful and strict teacher, and Cole, her enthusiastic student, suddenly being interrupted by Holo having jumped onto the table between them.

"Of course.. you were just being obtuse on purpose again, weren't you?"

Lawrence covered his forehead with his palm. He could pray until the end of time that she would stop forcing herself to wear such masks, but he'd never recognize it when she actually did. That was what she meant when she said he was doing this so his life would become easier. Why had he even bothered?

"Ugh.. when you finally get willful like this.."

He deliberately changed his entire tone.

"..it's a lot better."

Her nails dug into his hand as he finished talking.

"There you go, jumping right back into being deliberately vague."

She always had a forest of snares around her to trap small creatures like him. He surrendered, regardless of the frown on his face. He couldn't afford to escalate this now, or it would just defeat the whole point he was trying to make. He had to choose his words carefully.

"You're so much cuter when you just act like yourself."

She smiled proudly, savoring yet another victory over having managed to get Lawrence to speak plainly.

"And you are so much cuter when you struggle so."

"I lose, oh Wisewolf."

"Oh, ho.."

She walked away and took her smile with her.

"You have only yourself to blame."

She was whispering.

"Huh?"

Her eyes were as brilliant as they always were when she revealed she had been fooling him all along. And there was that happy look of complete victory.

"Now in the future, everything bad that happens can only be your fault."

He kept himself from blurting anything out, knowing he was trapped one way or the other.

"Um.."

"Oh, ho.. 'twas but a joke. Even so.."

She then sped off, and looked back at him when Lawrence instinctively gave chase.

"Life is long enough that I would have forgotten this after a while.."

Her proud smile gleamed at him, fangs and all.

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Chapter 3

Lawrence had finally made it to the manger to see his trusty old partner. He was ignored for a while as it ate, but it eventually turned its round eyes toward him and snorted unpleasantly.

“He’s in a great shape. He’s eating a lot.”

The owner of the stables smiled proudly, seeming more like he was trying to sell Lawrence his own horse. They certainly weren’t cheap, so if the man had been won over and was treating Lawrence’s horse like one of his own, Lawrence was even happier.

“Yeah, I’ve always got to bargain with him over how much food he wants to walk a certain distance.”

“I see.. sounds like you’ve trained each other.”

It had been cold lately, so a sunny afternoon like today brought out the best in people. Lawrence ended the amusing conversation by mentioning that he’d be gone for several days, and didn’t want his horse rented out.

“And please don’t feed him too much.”

“Don’t want me weakening your bargaining position, do ya?”

Lawrence could only hope the man was joking. He smiled and waved at his old friend.

“I’ll just have to trust you I guess.”

“Heh.. don’t worry, I’m glad to watch over him.”

Several other customers had come and gone as they spoke. Some were looking to rent horses, others to leave their horses here. All of them seemed like regulars, given how friendly they were with the stable-hands.

Normally a shop owner would leave new customers to his apprentices, and reward their regular customers by dealing with them first hand. Stable masters were the opposite. People entrusted their very lives to horses, so having the boss reassure newcomers was the way to go, if they wanted them to become regulars. Business practices varied as much as products did from region to region.

“Well, that about wraps it up for today.”

Lawrence counted the tasks off on his fingers as Holo stood and walked up to the horse. She

usually just sat behind him, looking down on him, so this scene felt quite novel. Even the horse looked back at her. Stable-hands often laughed as if they were talking to horses, but Lawrence wondered if Holo really *was* talking with him in secret. He let her be, and waited for her to return to his side.

“Were you two sharing tales of woe?”

“Hmm? Well, yes. We have both been collateral before, so we can see eye to eye.”

Merchants were dedicated to their possessions. They mended them until they could be mended no more. They likewise kept food until it was so moldy it was no longer edible.

Holo had a similar mentality. She complained about her grievances until it was impossible to complain about them any longer. The problem was that she turned almost everything into a grievance.

Lawrence shot her a spiteful glare, which was exactly what she wanted. She happily grabbed his arm, having apparently (thankfully) forgotten about Cole.

“Then where are we off to next? To buy food?”

“Already taken care of. All that’s left is firewood and coinage, and maybe having our knives sharpened. Hardly anything you’d find entertaining, I’m afraid.”

He had half a mind to bore her anyway, but it didn’t look like she particularly cared one way or the other. She wasn’t even asking whether the food was purchased from the Beast and Fish Tail. That made sense; it wasn’t as though they had to buy food she loved, and their wagon was already so laden that his horse would probably be glad he wasn’t the one who would be pulling it.

“But I fear we cannot do any of those things until we have the map and know where we are going.. so what else do you have planned?”

“Hmm? Just a relaxing stroll to waste some time.”

She suddenly spun around excitedly.

“I know! Let us return to the inn for a good row!”

He knew she was saying that on purpose, but he wasn’t sure if she meant it. She was just as stubborn as Elsa, after all. Maybe she really did want to get in a fight. He regretted having nothing more important planned, but it was too late; Holo’s mind was obviously made up.

He did his best to tuck his concerns away, and just be happy that Holo was happy. Maybe he was the one going crazy? He considered confiding in Cole to make sure, but his thoughts were

interrupted by a tug of his earlobe.

“What are you waiting for? I have made up my mind.”

Lawrence had honestly never suspected that wolves could be so amazingly stubborn. Her tail wagged all the way to the inn, and then all the way up the stairs. Her mood was truly excellent. If she was in wolf-form it might have been difficult to tell all of this, but in her human form it was painfully obvious.

She even hopped past the last stair steps like a little girl, making Lawrence sigh. She might be in a good mood, but that only made him worry more. He hoped she was only doing this to make him nervous, but knowing how stubborn she and Elsa were, he couldn't quite be certain.

Did he really have that little faith in Holo? He knew things would be fine in the end, but that didn't make it any easier to stomach this. He also knew how dangerous it was to think that way.

By the time they made it to their room, his arms were folded across his chest in nervousness. Holo was already way ahead of him, and her hand was on the door knob.. and then her happy expression suddenly vanished.

“What is it?”

As he asked, he heard another voice call to him from down the hall.

“Mr. Lawrence!”

It was Lou Loah. Holo's happiness had been completely washed away like she had been doused by a bucket of cold water. She turned to face Lou unpleasantly, but Lawrence gently pushed her from behind. Lou's face had “please come alone” written on it so plainly that he felt compelled to do so.

“You go in first without me.”

Holo's keen eyes were at least as good as his own, so despite her dissatisfaction she still acceded to his request.

“Be sure to join me as soon as you are done.”

She didn't even look at him to confirm that he was really alright with this, she just went ahead. Whether she trusted him or not, or just wanted to save herself, he couldn't tell. Lou took off his hat and greeted Lawrence properly as Holo closed the door behind her. Lawrence felt strangely lonesome when he saw that, but he still put on his business smile.

“How can I help you?”

“Well.. it’s nothing big..”

Lou pointed downstairs, at the bar on the first floor. Lawrence had no reason to refuse, so he joined him. Compared to Holo, Lou made quite a clamor as he walked down a flight of stairs. It made Lawrence wonder if powerful people got fat intentionally just to have such an overwhelming presence.

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It was still bright outside, so the bar was quite dead. Aside from two people who looked like travelers sitting by the door, drinking and chatting, there was just Lou and Lawrence sitting at the table farthest from them.

They ordered two glasses of wine from the friendly bartender, and Lou alternately stared at the man and Lawrence but said nothing. He still said nothing after receiving his wine; he just stared at it until Lawrence had already taken his third sip.

“You have connections with Delink Company, yes?”

Lou cringed a little after saying that, as if he was expecting to be beaten. But in spite of his timid appearance, he still asked Lawrence that question. If it was an act, he was really good at it. Lawrence would be surprised if it wasn’t, though, since it had the well-practiced air of a man who did this routinely in order to fool others into a false sense of superiority.

“So you were following me?”

Lawrence set his glass down and stole a glance at the bartender, who was writing something down. Lawrence remembered the feeling of being watched he had back when he met Eringin. It turned out it wasn’t just a feeling after all, it was Lou Loah.

“Yes and no; I was actually following Mr. Eringin.”

Lawrence nodded, but there was no way he could trust Lou now. Especially now that he knew the man was after Father Franz’s books in Elsa’s church in Tereo. He was already waiting for Lou to find a way to use him, Tereo’s savior, to convince Elsa to show him those books. It was just the kind of thing Lawrence had learned to anticipate from fellow merchants.

“Mind telling me why?”

Lou swallowed before answering.

“I’m looking to borrow money from him.”

Lawrence was surprised by the direct reply. Lou truly was a master of controlling a conversation. Lawrence was beginning to regret coming alone.

“I’ve been looking for a way to meet with him, and now I think I’ve found one.”

Lawrence was too busy thinking to reply. Lou clearly had designs to have him introduce him to Delink Company.

“They’re a pretty.. troublesome company. If you’re serious about borrowing money from them..”

Lawrence didn’t finish his statement, but Lou nodded anyhow. It seemed he already knew what he was going to say.

“Yeah, I know. This isn’t my first time in Lenos. I realize what kind of business they deal in.”

Lou knew Flynn, who was pretty atypical himself, so that checked out. Lawrence decided he didn’t have to play the saint after all, if Lou knew what he was getting himself into.

“But even so, I still want to borrow money from people like them, if possible.”

“People like them?”

“Right. People who don’t care about politics or rules or beliefs, just interest rates. Someone like me can only borrow money from places like that, you know.”

He finally smiled strangely and took a sip of his wine. He’d truly polished his routine to a mirror finish.

“I’ll go anywhere that’ll lend me a thousand Trenni without asking me any questions.”

Maybe his head was just so big it made his eyes look small. If he wanted to, he could look like a rabbit.. or like a cruel insect. Judging by his tone, a thousand Trenni was him being conservative. Clearly he wanted to state a much higher number.

“Well, I know someone from Delink, but I can’t say I know them well enough to-”

“Do it and I’ll pay you three hundred Trenni for your trouble.”

Lou’s lips clasped tightly shut after his proclamation. Lawrence wanted to squeeze out a reply, but didn’t know what he could possibly say. It was clear that Lou hadn’t even brought out his big guns yet, and it wasn’t like Lawrence had any real reason to refuse him as it was. Three hundred Trenni.. was a lot of money. Well worth the effort. It was certainly worth thinking over at least, so Lawrence did so before he answered.

“I’ve made a choice to stop risking my life for money.”

His problems would be endless if Lou caused Delink any grief. It wasn't something Lawrence could put a price tag on. As expected, however, Lou was far from giving up.

"Yeah, I heard from Flynn that you're a careful guy. You're heading north, right?"

".."

Lawrence stared Lou down, but he could see the writing on the wall: this deal was decided long before he sat down with Lou to begin with. He had to avert his eyes from the grin on Lou's face, the kind worn by someone who held all the best cards in the deck.

"Any apprentice knows that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link."

He had been waiting for Lawrence on purpose. He must have popped in on Elsa and Cole while Holo and Lawrence were out, and wrangled all the secrets he could out of them. They weren't the kind who could mount a defense against Lou's type, and Lou didn't even make any bones about it.

"I have a feeling that I'll get some help from fellow lovers of the northlands."

Such insidious words weren't normally used by merchants; they were the domain of diplomats sent to coerce other nations into cooperating. Lou placed his hands on the table, and joined them together so they resembled a big ball of dough, just being put into the oven to be baked. Lawrence knew he had to tiptoe, or it would be his face swelling up shortly.

"And what do you intend to purchase with this loan?"

Lou had clearly been hoping to work Lawrence into a corner where he would start asking such questions. He was on the road to a deal now, and the wrinkles caused by his newfound smile were quite shady.

"A banned book."

Hearing these words were enough to cool Lawrence's mind.

"About a banned craft. I want to get my hands on it."

The man before Lawrence frequented Flynn's supply depot for mercenaries, and was a friend of the outstanding Father Franz, never giving up on the dead monk's library of books. His greed was obvious. But so was his loyalty to his own desires, and the fact that he wasn't joking or lying. Lawrence continued his questions.

"..Alchemy?"

Lou's meaty neck flexed, but his eyes remained on Lawrence.

“Mining.”

The time to reveal his card had come.

“Let’s just say it’s not the kind of thing you’d want Diva to get their hands on first.”

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Of all the crafts to have an advantage in, boating and metallurgy were the two where even the slightest edge was worth more than one could imagine. Forget comparisons to sharper weapons and stronger spells; it was more like being able to turn sardines into sharks.

When one considered just how ruthlessly people behaved when they had such an advantage, it was no surprise that it was kept secret or intentionally destroyed. It didn’t take a lot to see why. Even the most powerful king was just a guy with a crown on his noggin, but knowledge spread like dandelion seeds.. all it took was a sudden gust of wind.

Mining was so lucrative for a few powerful people, and took so much planning, that it was only natural to suspect Lou’s motives. But he was right: if what he implied was true, then it would be a disaster if Diva got this book first. No one in the north would wish for such a thing to happen unless they were more fond of blankets and cold stone houses than sunny days in a forest.

It was all too obvious how Holo would feel about this. But Lawrence did his best to remain cool and collected.

“Can you tell me anything else?”

“Not before I hear your reply.”

Lou bent his body and pushed against the table, looking like a bag of grapes being pressed. He left, leaving Lawrence alone with two glasses of wine at the table. The bartender kept his eye on Lawrence after that, but Lawrence paid no mind to him and just stared at the ceiling for a while.

When all was said and done, he really didn’t get the feeling that Lou was trying to trap him in any way. The Roam river that passed by Lenos had two sources: the base of the mountains in Diva’s control, and the mountains of northeastern Ploania. If Lou was to be believed, the book had to be in the northeastern mountains. Of course Lou wouldn’t have confirmed that just yet, so Lawrence didn’t bother asking.

He did, however, ask why they would have such a book in the first place. Lou simply told him that there was an old monastery there, built over two hundred years earlier. A decade ago it had burned down after being struck by lightning, and when the local lord had it rebuilt, they

found an underground chamber that even the abbot of the monastery was unfamiliar with.

It was filled with books, most of them written in an ancient tongue the lord had no knowledge of. Even the wise monks were unable to decipher them, so they brought in scholars to determine their contents. To this day, they still haven't deciphered all of the books. Some were written in exotic desert languages, or were simply too ancient to make out.

The books from desert nations were worrisome, since they might be heretical works that would end the careers of the monks working at the monastery. As such, the lord decided to sell them to a collector in order to raise funds to rebuild the monastery. Of course, he still kept a catalog of their titles, just in case.

And now, that same lord was going bankrupt after being a bit too happy to donate to the Church. A company had floated him a loan, taking some of his treasures as collateral, and one of those treasures was that catalog. The company had little use for it, but a book dealer might.. so they had called in a certain Mr. Loah.

A southern book dealer could beat even a northern scholar. The scholar needed to read a book word for word, but the dealer only needed to hear the title and a summary. A scholar might eventually become familiar with a century of books, but a book dealer would be familiar with thousands of years of titles. Of course, when Lou spotted the titles of banned books in that catalog, he immediately bought it. He then tracked those books down, until he finally located one of them.

The techniques it described might be devastating in the wrong hands, but since nobody knew that, it had remained perfectly preserved for all those years. That sort of thing happened all the time. A Cardinal might even hang a satirical picture of the Pope in his room, if he didn't know the truth.

Lou wasn't sure if the current owner of the book realized its worth, but he hoped not. It seemed even Lou got serious when the time came to do business. As he got lost in his analysis of the book, he realized what it actually contained, and that no one else seemed to realize it yet. They eventually would, of course, especially now that they knew Lou was after it.

Any savvy businessman would jump at the chance to beat Lou to the punch now. People might walk past a coin lying on the road, but they certainly wouldn't ignore it. The moment others took an active interest in it however, it wouldn't matter if it was just the fevered dream of a madman.. everyone would begin hunting for it.

Lou had gone to Flynn for money first, but of course, Lawrence now knew why Flynn couldn't do so. Given the situation in town, Flynn was in the same boat the Beast and Fish Tail were in. His entire shop was full of goods, to the point where he couldn't even offer others a room. He surely had no cash to spare, and if he did he'd be far better off spending it on more goods.

“What a surprisingly tidy affair.”

Lawrence heard himself murmuring out loud as he sought another perspective on the topic. His old self would never have hesitated to earn three hundred silvers just for an introduction. But he had good reasons to hesitate now. Lou could be working for Delink to manipulate Lawrence, and even if he wasn't, it could bring trouble if he actually bought the book. The current owner may know nothing about its true worth, but leaving it on their shelf might just be the wiser course of action.

In the end though, when Diva learned of this, they would do anything to get their hands on it. It was simply a matter of time. A collector often had far too many books to study, and so a key title like this might end up sitting on their shelf for years. But that also meant that if Lawrence could trust Lou, it was a window of opportunity too wide to just pass by.

If only there weren't so many problems to worry about. Introducing Lou to Delink would probably end up with him getting the loan, but what if Lou was just trying to get his foot in the door to exact revenge on them? Lawrence certainly wouldn't emerge unscathed. Earning the wrath of the Delink company was something he shuddered to consider.

Beyond that, even if things were on the up and up, he would have to keep tabs on Lou the entire time. Otherwise Lou might just pocket his loan and run, leading to nothing but a huge waste of time. He hadn't told Lawrence where the book was, and it would probably be some town in the middle of nowhere.

Just the nearest town in Ploania was ten days away, and the capital was twenty days away. And that wasn't even counting the return trips. This whole enterprise would probably take a month or two, and by then the seasons would have changed and it would be a new year. Watermills would be turning, and Lawrence would have lived to see another spring.

But he wasn't a noble. He couldn't just sit back and enjoy the change of seasons. The trading route he had inherited from his master was a year-long trip, which was why he couldn't afford to give Holo much more than a season of his life to get her home. He would give his life up for her, gladly, but he wasn't the only person that would be troubled by that.

He wasn't being arrogant when he considered how the remote villages that relied on him would be affected. A mountain village too risky for others to visit in the winter might have to subsist on moss if he didn't make it there. Traveling merchants really did make that kind of a difference in his world. Every month he tarried meant another month they might suffer.

He could really only afford to choose one: bringing Holo back to her nearby home of Yoitsu, or pursuing this banned book.

“..”

His eyes closed in thought once again. His promise to Holo was to take her home, and bid her a smiling farewell. Not to deal with any threats to her homeland from some dangerous mining book. Besides, even she knew he was no legendary hero.

He downed the rest of his wine in an effort to send all of these concerns to the bottom of his belly, then stood up. Just knowing about this made him want to do something about it. Hugh was right to ignore Diva Company's ambitions. Wanting to change them didn't mean you could. So wasn't it understandable to just live your own life instead?

Of course it was.

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Without Holo there, the stairs sounded hollow. It grated his nerves. He probably looked pathetic, too. As he walked up to the door, he took a deep breath before opening it. But that breath didn't come out as the voice he wanted it to. He was completely dumbfounded by what he saw.

"What are you doing?"

He only got the slightest peek from Holo and Elsa, but Cole stared at him like he was begging to be saved.

"Be still."

Holo forced his head back into its original position, then began running her comb through his hair. There was a blanket wrapped around the boy, so it was clear she had been trimming his hair.



In the meantime, Elsa held a threaded needle. Cole's shirt had been removed, since he was under the blanket anyhow, and so Elsa was applying her skills to mend it. She kept eyeing it like she could salvage it - in much the same way she had eyed Cole himself earlier. She and Holo were both hoping to mend his destitute image, and Lawrence couldn't help but imagine Cole felt quite the same way he had, when he was caught between Holo and that waitress.

"Well well, with tidy hair you are a completely different lad."

Holo was right, it certainly was an improvement. Her proud smile was matched by her stance. And yet, Elsa wasn't satisfied.

"It is all for naught to call something tidy when it will just be a mess again after a nap."

Only someone who lived the life of a priest could get away with saying something like that. Elsa had just finished her own task. Despite the glower on her face, it was clear from her sigh that she was at least satisfied with her own mending job. As she handed Cole his shirt back, he fearfully put it back on.

".."

It was dead silent in the room as Cole stared in disbelief at how nicely his shirt had turned out. Holo's silence seemed to be born of her trying to keep her dignity.

"A torn wine skin will do nothing but leak. But it needs not be lavish, it only needs to be properly maintained."

As he listened to Elsa, Cole seemed more like a serious apprentice than some pathetic wandering student. It didn't matter that he still looked destitute.

"Messy hair is bad enough, but clothes make the man. And even they pale in importance to manners. Being polite and well-spoken should be everyone's goal. Of course, strong faith is more important still, but we must all find that path on our own."

It was like Elsa was delivering a lecture on a pulpit. She finished with a smile directed at Cole, leaving Holo too speechless to even show her displeasure. For Elsa to be preaching to Cole like that meant that Holo had probably started her fight while Lawrence was out.

Lawrence guessed that she'd probably just argued that manners were trivial. Someone like her could afford to say that, because all she needed to do was keep her fur tidy. Everything else was inconsequential. Lawrence was similar in that regard; function meant far more to him than form. That's why he could be with Holo, after all.

Lawrence had no trouble dealing with a tarnished business image, but Cole wasn't aiming to become a merchant, so he had little he could truly teach the boy. In this respect, Elsa was way

ahead of him. She believed in helping others first, and she led by example.

Holo's position wasn't very good against someone like Elsa. Lawrence's smile could only encourage her so much, so he prepared to open his mouth, but by then Cole had already turned to face her.

"I have never had my hair combed before.."

He was embarrassed.

"I'm so glad you were the first."

Holo's eyes went round, and she smiled in delight. Cole was worrying about her, even if she was losing to Elsa.

"Oh really? Then seek me out whenever you need to be set straight again."

Elsa frowned, interpreting Holo's words as an indirect attack, but Lawrence understood she was really grasping at straws. Not only because it was a tad unsightly of her, but also because she had revealed such an unnatural smile. But as Holo studied his mended clothes, she spoke up again.

"I can see young Cole growing to become a great man."

"Which will hardly be a problem for him if he follows my instruction."

Elsa couldn't pass up the chance at a childish counterattack. But Holo didn't even want to be beaten at being childish, so she stuck her face and tongue out at Elsa. Rather than growing angry, however, Elsa recoiled in surprise. Seeing that made Cole smile. Deep down, he was still on Holo's side.

But deep down he was also realistic. He knew that he had to listen to Elsa over Holo. And that's why Holo's smile was also tinged with loneliness. She was a Wisewolf; she knew that even if Lawrence tried to push her to be more true to her own desires, it wasn't going to happen overnight.

Being a tyrant wasn't easy. Of course, Lawrence was just as realistic as Cole, but Holo didn't have to worry about whose side he was on. That's why he wasn't surprised to see her ears flip up, or her face turn to his with a devious expression.

"And whose instruction will you follow, oh foolish one?"

At least the loneliness in her smile was gone when she said that. But what could he do? Holo was Holo. Just because she felt comfortable with him didn't mean she wanted others to know it. He knew that because he was the same way. She wouldn't have said that if she wanted him

to be honest.

“Only the Lord above knows for sure.”

He continued her exaggerated act, and sure enough she turned it right back on Elsa.

“And since He does not reveal his will to me, I shall never know.”

Cole grinned, but Elsa was no naive girl. She shot out an immediate reply.

“Only one with no faith could say something like that.”

Holo’s tail then shot out, loudly enough for Lawrence to flinch into action. His business smile shot out, and he hopped up, instinctively putting himself between the two of them.

“Oh, that’s right! I nearly forgot!”

~~~

The room was silent in boredom after Lawrence revealed what Lou had told him. Holo was the most bored, as usual.

“I certainly could help him, but it would be time-consuming. You’d end up having to head back to Yoitsu on your own after that.”

Even the Wisewolf couldn’t find the words to reply. Helping Lou would also help ease one of Holo’s greatest concerns. But as always, time was the problem. If they stuck to their original plan, they would only end up worrying until they heard what happened with the book.

In the worst case, they would have let a chance to prevent a disaster slip through their fingers. Only regrets would remain if that happened. But time wasn’t on their side. Holo knew that better than anyone. She couldn’t even look at Lawrence, and just frowned at the ground.

This was just a simple question of whether or not they went to Yoitsu together. But Lawrence had invested so much of his life for that promise that she couldn’t look him in the eyes right now. If she did, she wouldn’t be able to make a decision. Letting her emotions sway her was not something the Wisewolf would permit when making such a decision. She had to protect that principle.

Lawrence wanted to speak up, but this was ultimately her choice. He knew what she would end up saying.. well, at least he believed he had it pinned down. That’s why he was patiently letting her think, and it was also why he let himself make such an error. She sighed and looked up at him.

“We can only chase after the fruit.”

Clearly that was the Wisewolf talking. He was surprised to hear that tone and see that smile right now, and it made him angry enough to speak up.

“Are you-”

But he stopped when he saw her glare back at him. She only did so long enough to get her point across though; reality wasn’t going to let her allow Lawrence to keep his promise to take her back to Yoitsu.

“You know what you promised me, but our actual terms were simply that you help me find my way home. And you have helped me find the way already, so now I have to take the least sad route there.”

That was true. The problem Lou uncovered was indeed the more pressing one, and anyone who followed the path of wisdom wouldn’t let their sadness cloud that judgment. It was true. He had no choice but to accept it. But it still didn’t help him feel any less crushed. This meant the world to him.

“I also remember that was not the only promise you made me.”

“It wasn’t?”

He wasn’t sure what she meant. She stole a glance at Cole and Elsa before she continued with a smile.

“No, it was not. I owe you money, remember? You were so cruel that time, when you said you would chase me to the ends of the world if you had to, like the bitter merchant you are.”

Elsa and Cole didn’t believe her for a second, but when they saw how red Lawrence’s face was they gasped in shock. He had forgotten all about that.

“Did you really-!”

Elsa’s own face was suddenly red, and she was already turning on him. After all, tying someone down like that over a debt was too cruel to believe. Especially someone they cared about. Clearly Elsa saw nothing but pure evil sitting next to her.

“Wait, no! I can explain-”

“So you see, if my doing this will at least earn you profit enough to repay my debt, then even the stubbornest god should be able to forgive me.”

Elsa couldn’t believe what Holo was saying, and by the time she finally turned to see Holo’s fang-filled smile, she groaned in frustration and clapped her hands together in prayer.

“Lord help me, I do *not* have the strength to deal-”

“Speaking of deals, you told me it was ten days away, did you not? Then we should have just enough food and wine to keep me happy until we get there.”

Holo looked out the window as she carried on, as if her joke was itself a joke. Lawrence was so overcome he couldn’t even squeeze out the question his instincts were driving him to ask: did she really think that she would be able to bid him a fond farewell just because they had some good food?

He ended up swallowing that question along with his pride. Asking it would change nothing. She still couldn’t go back with Lawrence, and she was so used to forcing smiles that he wouldn’t be able to stop her if he tried.

“Then that is our choice. Go tell him. If you pass this chance up, you will regret it. All of that profit.. that should be reason enough for a merchant like you.”

He knew she was struggling just to force those words out. She wanted to be satisfied, and see him off as the merchant he was when they had met. The embarrassed smile on her face was begging him to not worry about her.

No matter how hard he pushed her to be willful, how forcefully he tried to get her to be true to herself, she couldn’t even do so to keep Cole with her. She was too embarrassed to admit being so defeatist, but Lawrence was the only one here she wouldn’t retreat from. He had to accept his fate, and take it with a nod.

“Of course. Here’s to an end as happy as the beginning.”

He did his best to end it on a beautiful note, but Holo was wholly unhappy with his words.

“You never know when to shut up, do you?”

“Wha-?”

He saw Cole smile, and decided all he could do was sigh and smile along.

~~~

Lawrence grabbed his coat and took a look out the window. With so many people on the road, evening mass was probably about to begin. His mind started wandering, realizing how strange it was to call it evening mass when church-goers attended it even before the sun began to set. What part of this was evening, especially during winter when they had to start even earlier to beat the sun?

At any rate, he had to hurry before the bell rang and all the shops closed on account of evening mass. The shops would be winding down now, so Lou might not even be around to talk to Lawrence. After all, Holo was right: if someone else beat him to the punch, he had no use for Lawrence anymore. He couldn't afford to take his time.

"You're not coming?"

Already set, he looked back at Holo as she lay in bed.

"What kind of Wisewolf would chase after such meager profit?"

He resisted the urge to call her out on how un-Wisewolf-like she looked sprawled out on the bed while combing her tail. His time was up, so he just shifted his glance to Cole. But before he could even ask if Cole wanted to join him, Holo beat him to it.

"Young Cole, at least you will stay with me, will you not?"

Elsa had already left to attend evening mass. If Cole left too, Holo would be all alone. But that wasn't really a problem. This was just Holo's last chance to spend some time with the boy. If she couldn't beat Elsa directly, she could at least try when her back was turned. Ever the cunning wolf.

Cole stared at Lawrence, then Holo. He finally gave up, and shot Lawrence a look of apology.

"Fair enough, then I leave Holo to you. You know the drill; don't open the door to strangers, don't let her order all the food in the inn, and make sure you let the innkeeper know if you two head out. Right?"

Lawrence had to get his shots in while he could. Cole just smiled as he took a seat next to Holo. She was the furthest thing from cute, but what else was new? With that thought, Lawrence headed out.

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Lawrence made his way through the crowds toward Flynn's shop. Odds were that was where Lou was, and if he wasn't then it was still a good place to start. Lawrence also had to prepare for his new circumstances. He was still traveling up north, but not to Yoitsu. He needed more than just directions.

He looked up at the steeple of the church in Lenos as he passed by. Most church-goers, including Elsa, would be congregated there right now, so now was a good time to see who was faithful. Anyone still working now wasn't exactly the firmest believer. Otherwise they would have closed up shop and headed to mass already.

That didn't mean everyone attending mass was a firm believer, of course. There were quite a few people who cared little about God, but still drank the holy wine. Just putting on such an act would improve their lives, whether they cared more about the flavorful wine or the teachings of God.

As he'd hoped, Lou was talking and drinking with Flynn when he arrived. Lou spun around quickly and stared at Lawrence, showing just how experienced he was at dealing with people like him.

"I accept."

Lou intentionally remained quiet to give off a sense of appreciation. What a cunning guy. He then excitedly reached out for Lawrence's hand.

"And here I thought God had given up on me.. I was this close to calling it quits."

Still, the happiness he was showing this time clearly wasn't an act. Courage, wisdom, luck.. merchants generally didn't have a shortage of these things. It was cash they were strapped for.

"This is all way beyond my expectations. My intuition must be shot or something."

Flynn couldn't seem to believe they were shaking hands. He was holding a pen next to a ledger, possibly ready to act as notary. Actually, scratch that - promises were far more valued by a man who dealt with mercenaries, so calling him a mere notary would be underselling him.

"I still wonder why a guy with a girl and a kid would take such a risk."

"This'll be the last time."

Flynn tilted his head and smiled, clearly taking those words lightly.

"Just how many times have I heard *that* from a mercenary, I wonder?"

That was actually more comforting to hear than Lawrence wanted to admit. He smiled inwardly at having such a naive hope.

"Well, I think you're great. Flynn wouldn't even give me the time of day."

Lou was right back to normal again. Flynn didn't stop writing, but neither did he smile. He spoke with open contempt.

"You're kidding, right? I already deal with mercenaries. If I'm also seen dealing with those slave traders at Delink, I'll be in real trouble. Hell, it wouldn't just be the faithful casting aspersions."

Town merchants had to stick to their guns. It was almost like they were being actively

monitored. Traveling merchants could afford to just move on to another town if they got in a mess, but not town merchants. Any stain on their reputation would be there forever. That's why vineyard owners never drank in bars, and why scale-makers never showed favoritism to moneychangers. They couldn't afford the suspicion.

"Not us, we'll be fine."

Lou wrapped his arm around Lawrence's shoulder, knowing Lawrence felt the same way. He wouldn't have bothered Lawrence otherwise. They weren't tied down here, and didn't have to care about taking loans from slave traders. Their image wasn't a concern.

Flynn sighed heavily, but at least he smiled. In his own way, he was probably wishing he could have a slice of their freedom. Being stuck in a city like Lenos could almost be as tough as having to make your way through the wilderness.

There was no such thing as the perfect place to be; that's why people always ran themselves ragged to defend their tiniest bit of happiness.

"Damn, this is such a relief. I'm so glad I found you."

"But all I can do is let you use my name to get in the door. There's no way I can guarantee they'll actually loan you anything."

Lou nodded right away. Clearly he wasn't just some dumb kid. He replied almost as quickly.

"I have to make sure they say yes. That's my problem."

He stood up tall, almost looking like some sort of gigantic pigeon.

"I'll just overwhelm them with my mighty confidence!"

Lawrence simply nodded, having no way to compete with that kind of self-confidence. Lou finally decided to tone things down a bit.

"By the way, Flynn.. mind if we chat while you work?"

Flynn didn't even bother stopping. He barely shot Lou a glance and a smile.

"Oh, was someone talking?"

Flynn was probably used to this. Holo would have grinned at that. Cole would be puzzled, of course, and Elsa would be irritated. Lou, however, happily nodded and turned back to Lawrence.

"You don't mind either, do ya?"

Lawrence knew better than to object, so he simply nodded. Flynn kept right on working as they chatted away in front of him.

“There’s a town close to Endyma, the Ploanian capital, named Kinisen. One of the companies there has the book.”

Lawrence didn’t know where Kinisen was, but he had heard the name. He was disheartened to hear it was near Endyma, though. That was a good twenty days away. He was definitely stuck following Lou now, if Delink agreed to his loan. Otherwise if he did something stupid, it was Lawrence’s neck on the line, since he was the one who introduced him. Worse, this could easily take two months now. He would barely have time to make it back to the south if he left the moment this was all over.

“You know what my job is as a book dealer. I use my channels to find books in collections, figure out where they’re from, and where they belong. I specialize in books from the desert.”

“And you’ve never been charged with paganism? Lucky you.”

Lawrence had figured this out already, but felt like playing along. Lou just flashed him a malicious-looking grin.

“Believers might like to think they have the high ground, but the Church’s isn’t the only belief system. That, and I don’t just do this for fun. Lots of people value my services. Without people like me, they wouldn’t even know which wines were safe to drink from their conquests.”

“Right, right, makes sense.”

Lawrence raised his left hand defeatedly so Lou would carry on with the real topic.

“I suspect that, at least as of this summer anyway, that company in Kinisen still doesn’t know what they really have in their possession. Their owner just loves exotic stories of adventure, especially from places like the desert. That’s what my traveling artist friend told me. He also told me that they probably just haven’t gotten to it yet because they have a lot of books to check out.”

Lawrence had been correct in that, too. It seemed that Lou was just as careful and calculating as he was, at least so far.

“That means we have two problems. One is the money. The other is how we get it there.”

“No choice there, we’ll have to take it ourselves. Not like we have a branch or some third party we can trust.”

Loah smiled when he heard Lawrence say that. Were they the owners of their own large

companies, they wouldn't have to dirty their own hands this way.

"As someone who also works with his own two legs, I agree."

"As for the way we get it there, I'd suspect a money order would be the safest bet."

Money orders were a godsend for traveling merchants. They could safely move capital without having to carry the actual cash. The Church might cry foul at such "evil tactics," but that hardly mattered. If someone like Hugh needed to send cash to Flynn, he'd just have Lawrence bring him a money order. That way they didn't have to risk being robbed or otherwise losing all that cash on their way to Lenos from Gerube. That was the whole point of a money order.

"Agreed again. Far less trouble than having to worry about each other the whole way."

Lou smiled. He knew a money order was the way to go. It was only valid between the two parties who were involved. It was useless for an illiterate thief, and neither he nor Lou would be able to run off with it.

"But this won't be your average money order. I don't even know if they'll accept one that far up north. It's a huge risk for us one way or the other."

That was ultimately the real problem. Money orders were a godsend, but not everyone treated them as such. They would be in trouble if this company in Kinisen wouldn't honor it. After all, the actual money had to be available in town for them to truly honor it, so what would happen if they were experiencing a situation like Lenos was in Kinisen? That's why merchants still carried cash despite the risk, and why they had to think hard before carrying large amounts of it.

"We'll just have to hope Delink can confirm that. Otherwise, if Kinisen is close to Endyma, we'll have to rely on the companies there for a connection."

"Good. Looks like we at least see eye to eye on this much."

Establishing such seemingly-obvious things was vital, lest it turned out that they weren't as obvious as believed. If one of them only trusted coins, and the other only money orders, it would only be a huge mess that couldn't be settled with words. Merchants tended to rely on their experienced intuition more than the words of others.

"You know, I really never wanted to deal with Delink again."

Lawrence finally understood Eve's chagrin at having to deal with Delink. He admired her just as much as he admired them, but he didn't want to deal with either of them again in this lifetime. Holo would probably be laughing at him under her cloak right now.

“Everyone regrets their drunken actions eventually.”

What an understatement. Lawrence looked out one of the lonely windows in the shop, realizing the sun would soon set.

“Anyway, I’d like to get the nastiest business sorted out as soon as possible.”

At least they didn’t have to worry about Delink being closed for the evening mass. Lawrence really didn’t want to have to toss and turn at night while worrying about this meeting, but Lou couldn’t help but crack wise.

“Oh really? I always start with the most delicious dish first, myself.”

Lawrence couldn’t stand that fat, smiling face much longer. Dealing with guys like him was like dealing with all the people they sucked up to their entire lives.

“That I can see. And yet..”

Lawrence couldn’t help but want some small revenge.

“..If I hadn’t been around to serve you such a fine dish, what would you have done?”

He’d been relying on Lawrence the whole time, so Lawrence wondered if he had a backup plan. Lou simply frowned, like he didn’t have one at all. Flynn finally had to speak on his behalf.

“He’ll never tell you.”

Flynn’s sense of comedic timing was just as good as Holo’s.

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Despite being as simple-looking as Flynn’s shop, this one was entirely different. It looked nice, with well-laid brickwork and a size that wasn’t out of place even among the other great companies on the street. But once you walked inside, the silence was deafening. Even the sound outside was muffled.

“What an honor.. you’ve decided to take me up on my offer of wine after all?”

Eringin flashed his dark smile. Not many businesses had four bosses of equal rank, but at the moment it seemed like he was the only one present. The others must be out on business.

“Oh, and you’ve brought a friend?”

He was easily in the top three of people that Lawrence would never want to introduce a friend to, and Eringin surely knew that. He delighted in such knowledge. His smile showed signs of

loneliness as he directed them to their chairs.

“Please have a seat.”

Even Lawrence wouldn’t prepare such lavish chairs for his customers if he was the boss here. They could even accommodate a man of Lou’s stature.

“I see you’re all alone today?”

Being direct was the only way to deal with someone who held a distinct advantage. The more words were spoken, the more likely one of them would be the wrong one. There was a reason that the wise had a reputation of stoicism; they knew their reputation could only diminish with every superfluous word. And yet, Lawrence was far too nervous to stay silent, and had already cast aside this wisdom.

“Of course. We normally only gather together to make a ‘purchase’. But don’t fret; we don’t let just anyone into this room.”

“You flatter me.”

The only part of Eringin’s body that moved were his thumbs, as they changed positions atop his still-clasped hands.

“Oh my, no. I heard what took place in Gerube.”

He wasn’t just saying that as a pleasantry; he had an interest in keeping tabs on Lawrence. But he smiled and continued.

“There is but one principle we must live by, and that is to make sure we maintain and extend our relationships with our associates.”

Holo would surely have kicked Lawrence by now. Eringin’s point was clear: because he knew everything about Lawrence, he was willing to talk to him.

“Oh, ho.. I see you didn’t bring your sword today?”

When what he was talking about sank in, Eringin again smiled.

“Please be more confident, Mr. Lawrence. Your handling of the conspiracy around that woman impressed us. You even managed to exact your own kind of revenge. It would be unbecoming of you to overestimate us and underestimate yourself. The only substantial difference between us is our choice of weapons, after all.”

Kind words were free, as was yielding a bit when you were in the dominant position. All merchants understood that, even Lou. But it was the man before Lawrence who couldn’t be

underestimated, the man all the guards in town wanted to befriend, and his kind didn't say such things easily.

"Thank you for saying that."

Lawrence put away his merchant's mask for a moment to make sure Eringin saw an honest smile. Eringin squinted.

"Well then, if you please?"

Lawrence had apparently passed the first risky hurdle. It was time to let Lou talk. Lou stood up straight and took a deep breath.

"There is a banned book about certain techniques."

Eringin stared at him as he had Lawrence, making it clear to Lou that it was his turn to win him over. Lou had never seemed so serious.

"A copy of that book was made at the Second Remelon Conference, which took place thirty or forty years ago. The original copy of the book was burned, and its author kept under watch. There have been rumors of the author's student managing to sneak out a draft copy of the book, but that rumor has only been the usual trickery you'd expect from a swindler."

That checked out. Even Cole had been swindled that way, and had to flee from Akent, the City of Learning.

"But this other copy is legitimate?"

"Yes. I have confirmed the details."

Lou then went into a smooth explanation of how he had discovered the book with the help of his wandering artist friend, and that confident smoothness wasn't the kind one would hear from a mere swindler. Eringin stared at him in evaluation, for quite some time, before his eyes shifted back to Lawrence.

"Mr. Lawrence, you have no way to corroborate this, yes?"

"Yes."

"This is a huge risk for you. You surely understand your liability as our medium, yes?"

It was a bit of a cruel joke, but Lawrence nodded.

"He's been evaluated by someone I can place my trust in."

Of course, that person's evaluation was that Lou was persistent and devious, both quite negative qualities on their own. But when put toward a goal like this one, they were positive ones that showed he would pull through in any way he could. Eringin tilted his head and smiled like an angel. Lou was so serious about this, in fact, that he couldn't help but wipe the nervous sweat from his brow.

"Clearly this isn't for the money?"

Eringin's eyes were closed in thought. He couldn't have forgotten the day of the riot, when Lawrence kicked Eve away and came back to his company.. all for Holo.

"We have profound ties to the north."

Eringin smiled as Lou said that.

"That's a lovely sentiment, but not what drives people like us."

Even Flynn was unwilling to deal with Delink, since they were slave traders. And he was a man who dealt with mercenaries; killers and thieves. Things like introductory fees were pointless with people like that, who sometimes weren't even paid in the end. They knew they might collectively make very little, but they still banded together in the knowledge that they could rob with reckless abandon to make up for it.

But even though those kinds of people were unwilling to deal with them, here was Lawrence. He'd detoured to Delink to introduce Lou to them, all for the sake of the northern lands. Delink could earn a great deal from strife in the north, given how many potential slaves and slave-purchasers such a scenario would create.

"Let's leave such lovely sentiments to the priests and sages. We merchants profit by satisfying the needs of others, so whose needs are you satisfying, Mr. Loah?"

The time to bargain had come. Lou cleared his throat and replied clearly.

"Sir Nicholas of the Duchy of Raundille. The good Sir is only interested in.. well, banned books."

Eringin seemed to have no recourse but to smile, as he placed his fist against his chest like he was suppressing the urge to vomit. It seemed even slave traders couldn't always believe what they heard.

"I'm sorry, did you say Sir Nicholas?"

"I did."

"We have a long list of clients.. I mean, "people we know," of course. There is no such Sir."

Eringin rubbed his forehead.

“Setting aside how real he is-”

Lou immediately began trying to salvage the situation, but Eringin cut him off. It seemed he didn’t really care whether Sir Nicholas was a real person, so why did he even bother asking? If he only asked questions to hear the answers then what had he been after? Lawrence was puzzled, but Eringin’s next question was too sharp to be confusing.

“How much profit do you expect?”

Merchants lived for profit, so it was good to hear him cut to the chase like this. People only asked self-interested questions when they wanted to be involved in something, and there was nothing more self-interested a merchant could ask about than profit. Discussions about profit estimates were perhaps the only times when the most stoic merchants couldn’t contain their excitement.

Common wisdom was that estimates were always too high or too low. The bigger the plan, the further off the estimate. Lawrence’s master had taught him this, and it didn’t take long for Lawrence to understand why merchants couldn’t contain their excitement during such discussions.

If Lou had ulterior motives, it would become obvious in the next few moments. A merchant driven to profit would be excited, and one who was lying wouldn’t be. It was that simple. Liars were easy to see through because they were so busy worrying about the lie they wouldn’t speak clearly about the profits.

“Around..”

But Lou was not lying.

“..a hundred and twenty Lumione.”

“That’s about what we could fetch for the princess of Loine.”

Eringin, too, was busily sizing up the profit.

“I’m not just being prideful, either. I know how markets affect book prices, but I also know that the alchemist Alan Mihail’s ‘The Iron Heart of God’ went for a hundred Lumione, and this book’s contents should be far more valuable.”

That was a lot of money. But book collectors didn’t deal in sensible trades, so it was still in the realm of possibility. Eringin stared hard at Lou without even blinking, until his eyes eventually closed. Lou breathed in deeply.

“And how much is *this* book worth?”

“A proper book merchant would pay at least thirty Lumione for this one.”

Lou had come prepared, and had set a book down on Eringin’s desk as collateral right from the start. It was a thick book that seemed fairly old, but might as well have been a paperweight decorating someone’s bottom shelf to Lawrence. He couldn’t believe that useless-looking book beside him was worth enough to achieve his own modest dreams.

Eringin remained motionless, aside from ringing a bell on his desk. The door quickly opened and a boy came in and spoke into Eringin’s ear. Eringin nodded, and the boy bowed and left.

“I can go as high as eighty Lumione. Enough?”

Lou replied with a pathetic tone.

“Enough.”

“But we’re going to charge you twenty Lumione regardless of whether you succeed or not.”

Given that it wasn’t even what Lou claimed his collateral was worth, it seemed Eringin was going to be kind enough to leave them enough to get back on their feet if this plan failed.

“..And I have one condition.”

“What’s that?”

Lou didn’t act surprised at all; he was probably willing to let Eringin suggest whatever he wanted at this point. Eringin let him cough before continuing.

“We gamble with every deal. It is the fortunate who win. But we plan on winning while sitting here in our chairs.”

Eringin turned to Lawrence and completed his thought.

“My condition is that you, Mr. Lawrence, will follow Mr. Loah. I want you to think it over seriously, and if that’s fine with you, I will lend you the money.”

Just as expected. Eringin spoke like he was saying a prayer, but there was nothing but realism in his words. Lawrence knew he was going to be solely responsible from the start, since he was the one who made the decision to introduce Lou. If Lou screwed up, it was Lawrence’s loss. And yet, something inside him was surprisingly nervous.

“No good?”

Eringin seemed surprised. Lawrence heard himself nervously reply.

“No.”

Lawrence soon realized that he wasn't feeling nervousness; he was feeling self-loathing. Feeling too nervous about the deal under such pressure was one thing, but Lawrence couldn't believe that he'd actually rejected Eringin's request just so he could travel with Holo, even knowing how disappointed she would be in him when she heard it. What an idiot.. he almost laughed out loud at himself.

“Oh well. But it'll still be a rough trip to go out there on your own, so let me send someone with you.”

Eringin rang the bell again, and another boy came into the room.

“I'll write you a money order, but you'll have to take it to a company we're friends with. The terms will be that you'll all have to be present and sign it before it can be claimed.”

That was reasonable. Eringin again spoke softly to his underling, and the boy left.

“Alright, well, I hope you don't mind chatting some more. I trust the guy I'll send with you, and the company in Kinisen owes me anyway.”

Threatening Lawrence and Lou now was useless. They would be monitored all the way to Kinisen, so it wasn't like they could run off with the cash or the book. And besides, Eringin's smile was more horrible than any threat he could ever utter.

“Um.”

Eringin turned back to them, having just cleared the atmosphere between them. Lou was mopping the sweat off his face, though, realizing that the master of the Delink Company was really just giving them a moment to catch up to what he said. He wanted to make sure Lou had been paying attention.

“When you say they're your friends, do you mean-?”

It wasn't unnatural to confirm where a transaction would take place. Nor was it strange for a book collector to also collect slaves. But that didn't mean that every book dealer was used to that sort of thing.

“Well, we've introduced them to several lovely girls with tan skin. Those kinds of friends.”

Lawrence was experienced enough to stay calm and just be happy that this wasn't his own line of work. If he wasn't so experienced he would be sweating bricks now, just like Lou was.

“Oh ho, please don’t concern yourself over that.”

Eringin wanted to make it clear that he held all the cards.

“We have lots of friends to help us manage regions we aren’t as familiar with.”

He didn’t have to care what people thought. They could be as pious as they wished for all he cared, because they couldn’t stop him. Slave traders were of course used to dealing with hurt, angry and frightened people. Such strategies were his bread and butter.

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Having made their deal, Eringin invited Lawrence and Lou to join him for supper. But Lou looked so nervous that he could pass out at any second, and Lawrence didn’t have the stomach to eat at the same table as either of them. They politely declined, and despite Eringin looking a bit hurt, it was probably not entirely an act. In any case, it was impossible to be sure. Eringin and his servants saw them off.

The sky was darkening, but it was the start of the evening. Lanterns were being lit at the pier, both on the ship’s prows and on the docks for the workers. And of course, not just for work - the pubs along the pier were all lighting up for the evening’s festivities.

“..he’s surely more formidable than any duke or count.”

That was the first thing out of Lou’s mouth.

“Yup. Now you know why all the town guards call him ‘sir.’”

“All he needs is a formal title, and he could rule with an iron fist. That was nerve-wracking.”

In fact, Lou was still sweating. It made Lawrence seem a bit braver by comparison, but he knew he would be lying to himself if he really began believing that was true. Holo had made it abundantly clear just how dim and cowardly he was compared to a real man.

“But at least we made it this far.”

That was the most important thing to remember. Lawrence gripped Lou’s hand as he reflected on just how much money they were dealing with. It was enough to turn a man into someone like Eringin.

“I was really struggling back there.”

“Oh God, don’t say that.. if you weren’t there I would have fainted. I’m going to need that strength later, too. You really earned those three hundred silvers!”

That was going way too far, but Lawrence didn't want to get angry. Such platitudes were common course for merchants, after all.

"We should find somewhere to celebrate.. I was so nervous that I sweat enough to down a whole keg!"

That wasn't a charmless suggestion, but Lawrence had Holo to worry about.

"Sorry, I can't.."

Lou, of course, knew better than to push his luck and start putting on his act right now, so he didn't insist.

"Ah, maybe that's a good idea. It's not like we won't be seeing each other again, so this way at least we won't start arguing right away!"

He laughed out loud, but the best Lawrence could offer back was a smile. Even so, their hands clasped tightly during their final handshake.

"Well then, have a good night."

Lou spoke loudly before walking off. Lawrence's hand continued to shake, but only until he'd turned around and taken a few steps.

"Hey."

A miserable-looking Holo stood there in front of him, also shaking. And that was no exaggeration. She was literally shaking as she stood there, with her arms wrapped around herself.

"Have you been waiting that long?"

".."

He received no reply. He imagined it was because she was freezing to the point where she couldn't even nod. Of course she would be miserable in that condition.

"Nevermind.. let's get you warmed up. But hey, you knew it was cold, so why did you wait outside for so long?"

He immediately removed his coat and wrapped it around her. The robes she wore might as well have been soaking wet, for all the good they were doing.

"I-I-I.. was too worried.. that you would.. b-be cheated.."

“That still doesn’t explain why you stood outside..”

She always had to start with some flamboyant excuse, so Lawrence just naturally ignored it as he wrapped her in his coat, then rubbed her back. Luckily, Delink kept a strong fire going, so his coat was wonderfully warm. She already looked somewhat relieved.

“Ah, there’s a stall over there.. hang on a sec..”

Holo finally nodded, and leaned on the wall next to her. She peeked at him through the boards of the stall, and he peeked back, knowing she was still far from comfortable.

“Damn it..”

He murmured to himself as he quickly ordered her some strong liquor.

“Come on now, drink some for me.”

Strong liquor was essential to make it through the long winters of the north. Lenos was no exception. As Holo sipped it, her eyes instinctively closed.

“Jeez.. your tail’s out..”

He smiled as he said that, but she didn’t make any move to hide it. She just took a breath and had another drink. That should be enough for now.

“Whoa.. not too much..”

His hand nervously darted out as she went for a third sip, but it stopped before it even reached the glass. He looked into her eyes.

“Hey.. are you already-”

She took her third drink like she wanted to fly away, and as she breathed in after that some color finally returned to her face. As did her usual smile.

“I really am a fool, aren’t I?”

That was all she could say in her slightly-tipsy state. It wasn’t as though she had a real excuse anyway. She was holding the glass with both hands, but her arms were glued to her sides. And it wasn’t because it was cold, but because she didn’t want to drop something. Lawrence could just barely make out what that something was in the dim light.

“They arrived just after you left.”

She gave Lawrence the glass and then pulled out a pair of letters. One was large enough to have

a map inside of it.

“I held onto them for you since you were not there. I did not dare open them with Cole. Especially not with that girl there.”

That was a bit childish, but she was smiling like she was drunk anyway. And maybe she was, even only on excitement. She was probably embarrassed about it, but it did explain why she would stand in the cold until her face nearly froze.

“I..”

She looked up at him.

“..wanted to read them with you.”

Now he knew she was drunk. Her face was thawing out like a honey bread, and he felt compelled to caress it with his free hand. His thumb rubbed against her cold cheek like it was a lump of dough. She’d made a realistic choice on whether to go to Yoitsu, but apparently that was the limit of her remaining wisdom. She had shivered outside, waiting for him, almost turning to ice in the process.

“Foolish mule.”

She smiled again, and seeing the wisps of white breath coming out of her mouth made him give her a big, but gentle hug. He replied as he released her.

“You really didn’t even try to open them yet?”

“Well, I did try holding them up to the light..”

Of course she wanted to read them, even if she had to cheat. He couldn’t help but imagine her stupidly blinding herself with the sun as she tried, looking more like a puppy than a Wisewolf. His hand caressed her face again.

“Then who should open them now?”

“Me.”

But of course. Lawrence wanted to burst out laughing, but he was still happy that she had waited for him.

“I want to open them, but there are two.. just like last time when I cried.”

That was a while ago, back when she fooled him into thinking she couldn’t read. He’d foolishly left a letter with her, and it turned out to boldly state that her homeland had long ago been

destroyed. It had been one of his gravest errors with Holo. He now held her icy hands, marvelling at how different a girl's hands were from the likes of Lou's; quite small and dainty.

"So were you cheated in the end?"

Lawrence pushed the glass back into her hand and began opening one of the letters when he heard that.

"Oh, you couldn't hear us from outside?"

He wasn't sure if she could make out the conversation in a building like Delink's, and sure enough, she shook her head.

"No."

She sighed and looked back up at him.

"But I still have a guess."

So she *was* playing yet another mind game with him. Why bother asking if she knew the answer? He stopped tearing the letter open and glared back into her eyes. They remained silent like that until Holo couldn't take it any longer. But that didn't mean she was going to let Lawrence get away with it.

"That meat bun of a man looked so happy with the outcome, yet you looked like you hated yourself. Surely you would rather clarify, then have me assume why?"

"Ah."

He had to admit that she was too observant to fool. Her arms were already crossed over her chest before she even sighed. Her sigh stank of liquor, but that only punctuated her apparent anger.

"Did you really think you could just waltz back to my side after doing that?"

She'd seen through him again. He could only turn away wordlessly.

"So you got lucky. You could have lost your chance to profit, and it may have meant disaster for Yoitsu. What would you do then? Well, actually, that is hardly the problem. What upsets me most is that you are more effeminate than I."

"..could you at least call me something like 'poetic' instead?"

"Hmph."

She continued sipping her liquor after snorting at him.

“At least that way I could say that I rhyme.”

Holo always brought up her Wisewolf expectations at times like this. He finished opening the letter with a heavy sigh. He opened the larger one first, assuming there to be a map inside. Holo was doing her best to feign disinterest as she sipped at her liquor, but her wandering eyes weren't helping that act. When he pulled a rough-looking piece of paper out of the envelope and traded it for the glass in her hands, those hands began shaking once again.

“Hey..”

She didn't even unfold it before speaking.

“Hmm?”

She stood there staring at the folded map like she wished it would unfold itself.

“Yes, what is it?”

She looked at him as he repeated himself.

“Even if we cannot go back together, you can still read this with me, can you not?”

He laughed out loud, but still nodded and stood next to her. Doing so blocked their light, so he intentionally shoved her a little. She kept clutching the map the entire time.

“You ready?”

She looked at him with nervous eyes, then finally stopped breathing and unfolded it.

“Oh~”

He purposely gave a pleased reaction. The map was indeed drawn skilfully; so much so that they could even read it in this poor lighting. Fran had drawn little pictures of God and Aeolus in the corners, like a proper map, as well as the usual sea monsters and great urn that eternally filled the oceans.

The roads connecting the north were all drawn as lines, and even Lawrence was unaware of some of the most remote places he saw. There were even mythical creatures on some of the mountains, making it almost feel like some map of ancient times; perhaps Fran was embellishing it with markings of the various myths each region offered.

Lawrence stooped over and read the map with Holo, from south to north, tracing their journey from Pasloe, through Ruvineigen, Kumerson, and finally Lenos. Of course, there was more to

the map than that, including a route through towns that Lawrence was entirely unfamiliar with, which ended at a forest.

A wolf sat atop that forest, obviously drawn at Hugh's request (and probably in jest). Tolchin.. that was the name of this region now. And the forest just beneath that howling wolf, proudly calling out to the world, was marked with several tiny yet clear letters: Yoitsu. Holo's homeland.

"I found it!"

Lawrence couldn't help but declare victory. Holo made a noise like a hiccup.

"Really!?"

He never expected that she'd be able to joke at a moment like this, and looked at her smiling face just to make sure. He was worried she would burst into tears, but thankfully that smile was sincere, and one of relief. She had finally found the way home. Lawrence almost felt let down to see that instead of tears.

"You know, I never thought it was a real place."

He had only heard the name "Yoitsu" once, listening in while others talked about it. It was a hazy memory, just as hazy as his promise to bring this legendary girl back to that legendary place.

After hearing a legend, he'd always realize it was just a lovely story, and chalk it up to people's need to chase after dreams. But neither he nor Holo were chasing after a dream; they had been trying to find a real place. It was of such profound importance that he'd traveled all this way with her.

Holo seemed to take his meaning, since she didn't get upset with his statement. He patted her on the head in appreciation, which was something else she normally wouldn't appreciate, but was permitted for once.

"Ask, and ye shall receive."

She was even able to quote a famous passage of the Bible.

"A worshiped God is always worshiped for a reason."

"After all of that hard work, we have finally succeeded."

After all those accidents and twisting and turning, they had finally made it this far. Holo turned to face him with a smile.

"Hey.."

She then folded the map back up with a sigh.

“Thank you.”

She then reached up and softly caressed his face. He received her caress not with embarrassment, but with a touch of scorn. She kept smiling, but her head moved no closer to his. She seemed more like she wanted to shout out than quietly thank him. He let his scorn turn into a smile and looked up wistfully.

“I risked my life, and almost went bankrupt..”

“So?”

“..all for that?”

He closed one of his eyes and pointed at his cheek. She stared at him as she clutched the map.

“Is that a problem?”

That really was the best response from a Wisewolf; not tears.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare suggest that it was.”

“Well, that is good then.”

He shrugged, but her arm coiled around his and she grabbed one of the envelopes he still held. Soon, the map was back inside it.

“‘Twould be a disaster if we were to lose this now. You take it.”

“Alas, I have but two hands.”

His left hand held her glass, pinched between his thumb and index finger, and the other letter still tucked between the other fingers. His right hand held hers, so she had no choice but to fix the situation. She took the glass and replaced it with the envelope containing the map.

“I shall take this.”

“Very well.”

She then resumed drinking, in spite of how strong the liquor was. Not even the biggest drunk could stomach that much so quickly. She really was having trouble containing herself. His hand was being held more tightly than ever, and her tail had puffed out entirely. But her desire to save face was even stronger than the sharpest liquor, as evidenced by her vain struggle to keep

Elsa from stealing Cole. Sadly, fate just wasn't on her side this time.



“So, I take it you haven’t eaten yet?”

He had to force a change in topics before she lost control of her emotions, so he went with his usual neutral suggestion. And as usual, it only made her frown.

“You really do rhyme.. like a monotonous poet.”

So now he was being too poetic, was he? His instincts were telling him to fight back, but he stifled them. If she let him say things that would normally bother her, the least he could do was return the favor.

“Oh, wait, maybe you can change your habits.”

Was that a hint of praise? He couldn’t tell. But he didn’t really have a choice but to change his habits now. So he led on.

“Why this way?”

“This way’s faster. We can grab something quick for now, and we’ll end up at the Beast and Fish Tail for the good stuff afterward.”

“I see.. as long as I can impose for some more liquor.”

Damn. Lawrence finally remembered that they should have returned the glass. But they’d gone too far to want to turn around now, so he’d just have to return it tomorrow. He kept them walking on, through the row of candles shining in the windows of the homes on the lane. This alley in Lenos with the tall buildings was his favorite for a reason.

It looked so narrow, but was actually just the right width to feel comfortably close. They could even hear the voices of the residents as they walked by their windows. But that only punctuated the silence when they came to the alleys between their homes. Likewise, the stone-paved road had its muddy stretches.

It was a strange atmosphere, where one could hear the voices of the people in their homes, but not make out their voices, and could only watch them leading their lives through the windows, like walking through a dream. A happy one, mind you, now that Yoitsu was a finally a tangible destination and not an ancient legend. A very happy one, where the road seemed to stretch out forever.

But the moment he realized that was why it was so happy, he realized just how careless he had been as a merchant.

“Why did I make that promise with Lou?”

If he was effeminate, Holo would laugh at him. But he wanted to hear her laugh at him again.

Heck, even if she drunkenly began to spew venom at him for ruining this atmosphere, he'd settle for that.

"Do you really want to go back with me that much?"

It was useless to reason with a crying infant, so Holo just smiled at the big baby beside her. She tightened her grip on his hand in an attempt to comfort him, and was clearly preparing to turn her question into something else entirely, but he beat her to it.

"Yes."

It surprised him just how effortlessly the word came out, but it turned out that she was far more surprised by it than he was. For quite some time she stared at him silently, using only her needle-like eyes to prick him back. But in the end, she laughed.

"Well, you do not match me."

"..?"

Lawrence felt like a starving cat being offered a bit of food.. he just couldn't resist it. And she knew that. Her trap was a beautiful face.

"I have given it much thought, and still feel that the book should be our priority. As I said, we have to chase after the fruit."

If it worked out, Lawrence would earn three hundred Trenni silvers and possibly help save the northern lands. He knew that. He'd get his money, and she'd get the satisfaction of saving her home. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement even if they didn't end up at Yoitsu together. No matter how sad it made them, their own wills just weren't as important to her as this battle was.

"How many of us are traveling now?"

It was such a direct question with such an obvious answer that it made his mind spin. She was looking right at him.

"..three.."

"And what good will it do for Cole to go to Yoitsu?"

Lawrence was about to pass out.

"But.. well.."

"We just chanced upon each other, yet he set aside his own goals for us. He is a tough one, but

traveling with us should not be his priority. At best this is just a vacation for him.”

She meant it. She liked the boy, and must have asked him how he felt when the two of them were alone together. Lawrence knew that, just as his own judgment impacted those around him, hers would likewise affect those around her.

“You remember what happened in Winfield, yes? He began to drift away when he saw that fool of a sheep, Huskins.”

“Drift away?”

“Indeed. He remembered what he was traveling for. To help his hometown. He had set that aside in a box for a time to rest.”

Things outside of business were not Lawrence’s strong suit. He knew how slow he was at everything else. In fact, the look of comprehension on his face now made her smile.

“I am hardly qualified to pass judgment, but you did not even realize that much, did you?”

“..”

All Lawrence felt qualified to do was nod.

“And then, confound it all, he learned something else from Fran in those snowy mountains. It is like an open book to me.. Huskins was so grim that Fran must have seemed like a polished crystal to his eyes.”

Hearing her say something like that about Fran was a bit unexpected, but it wasn’t far off the mark. After all, Fran did everything for her lover. She had even impressed Holo. But what could he say, with Holo staring at him like this?

“And now, finally, he meets this hard-edged girl.”

A boy wanting to learn Church Law, and a girl wanting to defend the Church’s honor in a pagan village.. it was a perfect match.

“And they meet in a city controlled by the Church, no less. For the first time, he has seen the greatness of a cathedral, and now he has again found his drive to use this powerful association to defend his own village.”

She sighed. It finally sank in why Cole wasn’t talking to Holo, his closest friend. She called herself the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. She was a pagan god, as far as humans were concerned. It was just too difficult for him to reconcile those facts.

In the same way that Flynn, of all people, couldn’t reconcile dealing with Delink, Cole couldn’t

help but treat Holo as the Wisewolf and not his older sister. He wasn't afraid of her, of course, and even marveled as he touched her tail, but the fact was always there that she was a Wisewolf.

It was starting to make sense why Holo gave up and chose to go to Kinisen. It was in all of their best interests. For her, Kinisen wasn't just the end of a journey, but the beginning of a new one.

"You will earn a lot this time, yes? And that meat bun will surely head back south with Elsa. Let them take Cole. I cannot stand that stubborn girl, but she is a better match for him. Who knows? He might even be the boy she is looking for to take over her church."

It was obvious she was poking fun with that last sentence, and that she didn't want to take him with her to Yoitsu.

"Hey."

Holo had paused long enough, and continued again.

"The longer one's life, the more they experience. After a while, it hardly feels like you are reaching your goals anymore. Just consider how determined Fran is, yet she cannot smile even on her deathbed."

Holo made her point clearly about living a long life.

"I feel that we must continue smiling and living. That way when we finally meet again, it will be with a smile."

In other words, be realistic, so the sadness was minimized.

"Just like a merchant.."

"Hmm?"

"We like to word that as 'always maximize your gains, and minimize your losses.'"

Holo frowned, probably not wanting to hear it put quite that way. She tried to smile, but it came out unnaturally. Lawrence couldn't let her have all the good lines. And he couldn't forget his real promises. Whatever she decided, he would help.

As the alley narrowed, he gently pushed her in front of him. Her tiny body felt like it would disappear if he reached his arm out to her. And once they arrived in Kinisen, that would actually happen. He would have to smile then, and wait for the next day he could smile with her.

If he thought about it that way, he realized that they weren't dying just yet, so it was too early to let this get him down. He'd just have to make this another farewell, like all the others. That

was that, he would just have to swallow his fears. If he let them show any clearer, a Wisewolf would either laugh at him or hit him.

He found himself wondering whether he could really trust her that much, though. She was a kindly soul, and he knew that, but he couldn't shake his desire to grab her and never let her go. It was an utterly foolish desire, but it seemed like the only way he could possibly settle his heart.

This was all making him hate himself. He had to take in a deep breath.



Chapter 4

Four people ate breakfast together the next morning. Breakfast was a given for travelers about to depart, but to Elsa it was still a luxury. As such, they compromised and settled for tough black-wheat bread with some beans. They were even permitted some diluted wine to quench their thirst.

“Let me explain the plan.”

Everyone except Holo was paying attention.

“Today and tomorrow, we’ll get ready to leave. If we’re lucky, that means we’ll leave the day after next. I’ll head over to Flynn’s and deal with him and Lou.”

Everyone mimicked Cole and nodded. Lawrence then turned to Elsa.

“I would suggest that you join me, and plan for your own future.”

It was customary to tear bits of bread as one ate, so nothing would crumble to the ground. And yet Elsa was so refined she didn’t have to worry about that. She ate like it was some well-practiced ceremony, and could even eat politely while listening to someone.

“Fine. I’ll need their help to write a letter to the village anyhow.”

Lawrence nodded and then turned to Holo, who was tossing beans into the air and catching them with her mouth like a child.

“How about you?”

She had just tossed a bean up into the air, but still caught it skilfully even with her eyes now turned to Lawrence. She took her time to chew it, then drink some wine, then answer.

“Not much, unless you were hoping I would start a new legend.”

Now that she knew the way, she might as well just change into her wolf form and run there to save time. It wasn’t like she needed human roads or Flynn’s help.

“I would be proud to be one of the people who knew the truth behind a new legend. I just hope I could keep it a secret..”

Holo frowned at Elsa’s smile. Damn, they were already at it? Lawrence sighed and stared off at the map he’d spread out on the table.

“In that case, I might as well just sit here.”

“Then it’s settled: you’re coming with us.”

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Holo combed her tail after breakfast, while Elsa cleared her throat and gave Cole a lecture about the Bible. Lawrence was stuck in his old habit of trimming his beard while he stayed in the city. The morning sun shone off the well in the courtyard, making him eager to get moving before he became lethargic. He had a lot to do when they got to Kinisen.

That said, such a serene view was something he treasured. It wasn’t anything like a silent road through a forest or plain. It was the kind of thing he cherished when he was alone, and even more now that he wasn’t. He was starting to doubt being able to live alone again, in fact, and had to laugh at himself for thinking that. He’d find a way. He’d been able to before, and again: nobody was dying.

He really needed to stop thinking so much.

“Alright..”

He shook the last of the bread crumbs off his shirt and was ready to greet a new business day. Against his expectations, mercenary supplier’s stores weren’t quiet places in the morning. The mercenaries might be sleeping, but not the suppliers. He even mistook them for street performers until he realized they were the guys who traveled to battlefields to keep the soldiers fed. They were so relaxed and chipper it even looked like they’d forgotten how to fear death.

“I’ve only got one unit to supply today, but on a busy day it'd be ten or twenty.”

It felt like a storm had swept through the place after the suppliers left the shop, leaving only silence behind. Flynn was already reaching to pour more wine into his glass.

“Quite busy today, aren’t you?”

Flynn smiled strangely at Lawrence’s expression of surprise.

“We’re not paid to sit around. If the lords say jump, we jump.”

Flynn’s shop was even more full of goods; he was taking advantage of the situation in Lenos quite well. But Lawrence didn’t say that. Profits came to those who knew how to leverage the situation, and Flynn wasn’t exactly being shady.

“Right, so why’re ya here?”

“Fran’s map finally arrived.”

Flynn’s face showed excitement.

“Ah, that’s great.”

He instinctively reached his hand out, waiting for Lawrence to hand the map to him. But Lawrence had purposely left it at the inn, and all Flynn got was a chuckle from Holo as he and Lawrence stared at each other.

“Yoitsu’s in Tolchin.”

“Oh, that’s a nice region..”

Flynn sat down while picking up his pen.

“..But it’s a big one.”

Indeed, Yoitsu was just a small spot in Tolchin on Fran’s map. Still, Holo could probably find her way there with her nose, once she got close enough.

“That reminds me.. there was a small village here.. well, really more a temporary lodge for hunters and woodcutters..”

“What was its name?”

Holo couldn’t resist asking. Elsa and Cole were happily studying the papers and weapons on the shelves, but as they heard her ask they also turned expectantly.

“It has none, actually, and it never will. You were born in Tolchin, yes? At least I think that’s what I heard?”

Holo’s lips moved, but in the end she didn’t reply other than to silently nod her head.

“My kind doesn’t care what the name is. It’s just another part of the forests and mountains, and we’re just proud to be born in the wilderness.”

Flynn announced that so effortlessly that it was obvious he was trying to change the topic. But it was too late. Holo’s eyes were serious now, and she began questioning him, one question after the other.

“Are the forests there still rich?”

Flynn tapped the book on his desk with his pen, then gave up and set his head in his palm.

“Quite rich. They’re our best hunting spots for deer.”

“And the wolves?”

“The wolves?”

Holo stared him down. Anyone who knew her true form would be unnerved by the silence that followed. When Flynn suddenly stood up, Lawrence followed suit.

“There are still quite a number of fierce ones there.”

Holo breathed in deeply enough for her tiny body to swell. But if Lawrence told her to just let herself cry, she would bite him on the spot.

“In fact, quite a few mercenaries fancy themselves the sons of wolves. They sure fight like they want to prove that’s true.”

The Church saying ‘if you are not the son of man, then you are the son of God’ was quite popular, but Flynn didn’t manage to get Elsa to react. She just ignored him, even as he tried to cater to her sensibilities.

“You..”

He stopped as quickly as he restarted. She was born in the north, yet came from the south, not knowing where her home was. He wanted to choose his words carefully, knowing how upset Holo must be right now.

“Were you all planning on going to Kinisen, then? Or were some of you staying behind, or going to Tolchin?”

“Kinisen first, then Tolchin. That’s why we want to know the way. Or would you say we’d be better off asking the locals in Kinisen?”

Flynn waved his hand to indicate that wouldn’t be necessary. He closed his eyes and scratched his chin with his pen.

“There’s a fur trading route between Kinisen and Tolchin. It’s also unnamed, but it’s the only such path for the fur traders. As long as it’s not too snowed-over, you should be able to just take a hike that way. It’s in the Bruner Mercenaries’ territory, but they’re great guys. If I write you a letter, they’ll even help you guys out if you run into problems.”

Lawrence couldn’t tell if Flynn was trying to reassure Holo or trying to win his favor so he’d let him see Fran’s map. But either way, Lawrence had no desire to keep him from seeing it.

“Thank you so much.”

Holo's mouth remained closed even while Lawrence thanked Flynn on her behalf. Her memories had become fragmented, but now she had a map. With that kind of help, the rest would be easy for her. She could make it back home to Yoitsu. Lawrence patted her back as she sat there, all choked up.

"And what about you two? One of you has to go back to Pinault, don't'cha?"

Flynn pointed his pen at Cole and Elsa. Cole fidgeted nervously, but Elsa didn't.

"Well, we're here to find Lou."

She spoke clearly and unemotionally; cool as a cucumber. Flynn blinked and cleared his throat, then put on an act.

"Well, I'm confident that anything he can do, I can do better."

"Really? Then would you please help me write a letter?"

Flynn was completely taken off-guard by her firmness.

"Ah, alright."

Flynn folded, and Elsa sighed - but it was actually a laugh she was concealing as a sigh. She had her own way with men, just like Holo did. In fact, judging which of them was better at it wasn't easy.

"I have pen and paper enough; I can even write it for you, if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary. It is not as if I have any money to pay you with."

Flynn stood tall at her cool statement, unable to back down now.

"Oh, that's not a problem. We'll just have Lou pay for it."

Elsa blinked at him, and finally smiled.

"Thank you."

Lou had been tasked with preparing for their trip. Flynn made it clear that this meeting was not related to him, and that no matter how many crates he had in his shop, Lou wasn't getting any of them. Elsa wrote her letter while Flynn worked, so Lawrence took Holo and Cole outside to stand under the sun for a while. With all those passers-by to watch, at least he wouldn't be bored.

“Everything becomes so definite once you finally see it.”

He sighed, watching Cole as he walked off to find a cobbler. It seemed the boy was trying to give Lawrence and Holo some time to be together. Kids his age would usually be apprentices in a factory or shop, so someone suddenly mistook him as a lazy urchin and knocked his head angrily. But he backed off after Cole nervously pointed at Lawrence.

“True.. once you have a set destination, all that remains is to walk onward.”

Holo replied from her seated position on the stairs, as she watched Cole with her head propped up in her hands. The sun seemed to be making her sleepy.

“Simple and direct.”

Holo closed her eyes and smiled at his words.

“Indeed. No excuses left for acting puzzled.”

Her face was smooth as a boiled egg that had just been shelled. No trace of annoyance was on it at all. In the end, it was Lawrence who was the only one that cared about going back to Yoitsu with her. He sighed and stretched to conceal his thoughts.

“Trouble is, I really don’t think I’ll want to head back out to work after such a relaxing life.”

He squinted as he stared at the sky. Holo also opened her eyes just wide enough to peek at him.

“If that were true, it would be a concern.”

Lawrence couldn’t hope to win with words, so he just shrugged and ignored her challenge.

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After what seemed like forever, Elsa finally finished writing her letter. She could last forever while talking down to others, but not so with writing. Her face and hands were covered in ink, and she seemed exhausted.

“Where did those two run off to?”

“The pier. I gave them some coin, and off they went. Care to join them?”

Elsa didn’t reply, other than to shake her head. She surely didn’t have that much to write about, so her exhaustion had probably mostly been from trying to find the right words to say to Evan. Lawrence kept his thoughts to himself, though, and took a look around.

“Where’d Mr. Flynn go?”

“I’m not sure.. he just had to head out.”

The door outside was open, but not entirely. It seemed to be open more to let light into the dark shop than anything. But it was strange for Flynn to leave his shop carelessly unguarded like that around customers, even if Elsa was a clergywoman. Lawrence supposed he just had nothing worth stealing there, given that the best merchants only had to concern themselves with credit-based transactions.. and credit couldn’t be stolen just like that.

“Maybe it would be better not to leave, then?”

“Probably, but..”

“Hmm?”

Elsa was truly exhausted.

“I just need some fresh air.”

Lawrence smiled and finally let her pass. As she closed the door behind her, it sank in that he was the only one there in that dark shop. He sat back down and looked around. It wasn’t a particularly big or small shop, wasn’t decorated in any fancy way, and had just the right amount of open space to feel comfortable. It was kept clean, yet not to the point where it looked like nobody lived there. If only one didn’t fancy a lot of furniture, it could really feel like home.

Lawrence took a deep breath through his nose and let it out through his mouth. It was quiet, the kind of quiet that people would find pleasant. But he felt the shop needed another open window. Otherwise how would Holo comb her tail in the sun? The moment he caught himself daydreaming, he shook his head. He was doing this more and more often lately. And the dreams were getting depressingly specific.

Daydreaming was fine, but he had to keep them to himself for Holo’s sake. How could he possibly tell the Wisewolf to settle down and open a shop with him? Heck, she wouldn’t take him seriously even if she wasn’t a Wisewolf. No, this was one dream he had to keep to himself.

“Kinisen..”

He murmured the name and smiled. If Holo wasn’t going to help fight to keep them together, he didn’t have a prayer. She made the choice, and now he had to help her out while he could.

Kinisen was supposed to be a wealthy town, on a gentle but very flat slope. The trees were so green there that people liked to call it a forest town. Holo and Cole would love it there. Elsa.. well, she might struggle, being so sheltered. But even she should find it a comfortable place.

Since it wasn’t far from Endyma, the Ploanian capital, it was sure to have a nice selection of

dishes to choose from. It was the perfect place for them to bid farewell. He smacked his cheeks lightly and said it out loud.

“The perfect place for us to bid farewell.”

He always felt that one of his few good points was how stubbornly he pursued his goals, no matter how much he had to struggle. It was a shame Holo didn't have a bit of that fire in her. Either she really felt that his idea of going back to Yoitsu together was too sad, or she just didn't have room in her life for another.

Another.. the moment he thought of that, he saw her smiling at someone else in his mind. If that wasn't enough to completely blow his mind, Flynn suddenly returned. He gently pushed the already-open door wider.

“Oh.. has the holy one finished her letter?”

“Yup. And it took all the fight out of her.”

“Well, at least there's that, am I right?”

He said that like he was trying to keep a secret. Lawrence couldn't believe that Flynn, a man who dealt with mercenaries, would smile and act this boyishly.

“Well, people would rather not be so far from their lover to have to write them letters, am I right?”

Only someone who'd experienced something like that would suggest such a thing, so all Lawrence could do was force out a sigh to keep from thinking too much about it.

“Quite right. Find me one person who wouldn't rather have their lover at their side.”

Flynn nodded pleasantly as he sat down. Elsa's letter had been folded and left on the desk. Flynn held it up just long enough to confirm whether the ink was already dry.. he looked like he'd rather not actually read it.

“To be honest, I'd like to chat.”

He refolded the letter and spoke like he'd been talking with Lawrence all along. Lawrence was a bit bewildered, trying to figure out what Flynn could want to talk about so cautiously, until Flynn filled in that blank and shocked him.

“I just tried talking with Delink.”

Flynn had flatly refused to help Lou, claiming he had no desire to be seen dealing with Delink. Was it just a ruse? Lawrence really couldn't believe it was, so Flynn must have been very

concerned about something.

“And, well, I kind of did.”

“..Oh?”

If he was just joking around by stalling, he wouldn't have said it that way. His face was warning Lawrence that a difficult conversation was coming up.

“I supply mercenaries, and I mediate between them. Delink is an entirely different beast. But you'll find no mention of mercenaries heading to Tolchin here, so I suspected they might have something to do with that.”

He tapped the folded letter.

“Mercenaries always talk with slave traders before a war. They need to know if it's even worth taking any slaves or not.”

“And..?”

Lawrence was getting anxious, now that Flynn was testing the waters so carefully. Then, he looked at Lawrence with pity.

“I'm afraid Tolchin is going to be attacked.”

It suddenly made perfect sense why he waited to chat with Lawrence alone. Lawrence had already judged that Flynn didn't have the heart to tell a girl like Holo something like this. And with that look of pity on his face, Flynn must know that Lawrence was the same way. Unbelievable. Lawrence wanted to punch Flynn in the face for being so unfair.

“But I really couldn't understand why they were going there. It's just mountains and forests. There aren't even villages worth naming. What kind of slaves are they hoping to find?”

He looked away.

“They must have found a mine.”

Holo had just asked him if the forests there were still rich. And given how unexpectedly Lawrence had decided to help Lou, Flynn must have realized what they were so worried about: just this kind of situation. He even seemed to share their concerns.

“Still, I may just be overthinking things. All Delink knows is that there's one mercenary group offering to sell them slaves from Tolchin.”

If they'd found a mine there, it would explain everything. There would be people there, secretly

trying to earn cash where no one should be. People with bad luck, yes, but Lawrence didn't have to get worked up about that. It wasn't him that was going to be selling slaves.

But then.. Holo had to head back on her own now, and he didn't want to leave her with such problems. Selfishness just wasn't in his character. Flynn suddenly spoke up as Lawrence reached this conclusion.

“Oh! And the symbol of those mercenaries, incidentally, is a wolf.”

“A wolf?”

Flynn nodded and tapped the side of his head with his finger.

“They have a weird name, and they're a pretty small band, but they're an old one. Let me think.. what was it..”

He finally managed to knock the dust off the correct shelf in his mind.

“The Myuri Mercenary Band.”

Holo's friends from home.. Lawrence would never forget their names. Yue, Inti, Paro.. they sounded like codewords to him. And the last one she mentioned was Myuri.

“They're reputedly a small, but well-organized outfit with a terrific leader. They've never come here, though, so this is all just hearsay.”

Lawrence took in a slow, deep breath as Flynn stopped talking. Long ago, their sharp fangs and claws had fought in wars. Many had died and returned to the soil, fighting the Moon-Hunting Bear or even humans. Lawrence already heard all of this from Hugh in Gerube. Like proper wolves, they were the first to go to war, and the first to die. Their pawprints had already long since faded in Yoitsu.

Holo had been forcing herself to accept this, and now it seemed that God wasn't that cruel after all. The wolves of Yoitsu might have survived, to this day using a wolf as their symbol along with Myuri's name. Of course they would be around Yoitsu now.

Myuri, Holo's ancient friend, might well be alive, and trying to defend his home against Diva Company's incursion. It was starting to sound more and more like it might be the best news Holo could possibly receive.

“Well.. I'm sure your friend will worry if she hears only this much. Shall I dig around some more?”

Lawrence shook his head. Just telling her that the Myuri Mercenary Band was keeping watch on Yoitsu would bring her incredible joy. And the one bringing her joy would himself feel joy at

having done so. He wanted to run off to her right now, just to see that joy on her face.

But a part of him wouldn't let him. It would be a happy moment, but it would also be the last he saw of her. She wouldn't even need to bother going to Kinisen, she could just fly straight off to Yoitsu in her true form. The very last thing he would see was her tail wagging as she left him.

His trip back south would be filled with questions about whether she reunited with her friends. He couldn't be there with her in Yoitsu to know for sure. If she could happily reunite with Myuri, he wanted to be there. He wanted Myuri to at least see the one that helped Holo find her way home.

Who knows? If Myuri didn't hate humans, he might even hear a kind word of thanks, and then.. and then Lawrence fell apart. He couldn't bring himself to picture what inevitably came next. Mercenary bands never named themselves after women, after all.

Even if Myuri wasn't her former lover, they were old friends and she never thought she'd meet him again. And right between them would be this tiny wisp of a merchant, staring up at two gigantic wolves. It would be hilarious, if it wasn't so tragic.

Lawrence simply had no place there. He couldn't just be optimistic this time. The only right thing for him to do now was raise his hands and shout "hurray!" At least he could smile while bidding Holo farewell, saying "our trip has a happy end after all."

And so, he forced himself to smile and turn down Flynn's offer.

"No.. there's already enough worry in this world."

Flynn stared at him, then finally sighed.

"Quite right."

His words came out as a murmur.

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The fresh air did Elsa a world of good. She seemed recharged when she came back in. She wasn't the type to eavesdrop, so she wouldn't know what Flynn and Lawrence had just discussed, but her keen senses still detected the atmosphere and she looked at them doubtfully.

Lawrence was in no position to pretend he hadn't seen her reaction, but he wasn't in a position to tell her everything, either. He'd been lost in thought over what time would be best to tell Holo about Myuri, and honestly wished he could just let God handle it.

If he told Holo now, it would just be another thing on her already-heavy mind. Even if she ran

back to Yoitsu, she still had other things to worry about. He also knew that she wouldn't just ditch him to rejoin her friends. She really did want to depart with Lawrence in Kinisen.

As such, Kinisen would be the best place to tell her. But that felt like so much of a selfish excuse that it ate away at him. He knew he wanted to stay with her a little longer, and he was still clinging to the notion that she was thinking only about him.

Not only that, but he knew better than to think he could keep this hidden from her. She would notice, and worst of all, she would probably let him get away with it. Lately she'd been letting him get away with keeping his secrets while trying to laugh it off. And that's just all she could do in the end: try to laugh it off, despite knowing that he'd been intentionally keeping it from her.

He was still being a merchant at heart, still trying to maximize his own profits. He understood now just how quickly a person in love could think, and just how useless that speed was. You couldn't settle on any good decisions in the end. It was a valuable life lesson for him to learn, but all things considered he would rather have passed on the lesson entirely. He sighed, wishing that was possible.

"Hey, we have souvenirs!"

The door suddenly slammed open with that great shout. It was a terrifying thing to hear for someone used to being in a quiet shop. He, Elsa and Flynn all flinched, then froze. They stared at Cole as he dragged a bucket into the shop, then took a seat in exhaustion. It must have been horrible for the frail lad to drag something like that all that way.. Lawrence felt sorry for him. But Holo didn't seem to care at all. She stood with pride.

"See? We brought today's lunch!"

Her face was red as an apple, and drenched in sweat. At first Lawrence wondered what was in the bucket, but it smelled so fishy he had to pinch his nose.. the bucket was full of eels.

"They are great, are they not? We wandered around the pier until some fool dropped a bucket and spilled them everywhere!"

Elsa was shocked, but Holo just gave a hearty laugh. She stank of fish, and her sleeves were wet.

"You.. didn't steal these, did you?"

"Of course not, stupid! He asked us to help, and this was our reward! We caught most of them, did we not?"

Cole could barely smile. The eels actually did look great; they were all large enough to earn even Flynn's approval.

“Hey, you know.. you really ought to change clothes first.”

“Oh? Ah, yes, we are all wet.. then I shall leave these here! Come, Cole!”

She yanked Cole by the arm as she spoke, dragging the tired boy with her. He was so tired the rest of them were praying that she would just let him rest first, but it was Flynn who finally laughed out loud and told her to stop, not Elsa or Lawrence.

“Hahahaha!”

Flynn’s was an infectious laugh, especially with his hands on his waist and his eyes facing the ceiling. Not even the best actor in a comedy troupe could match that kind of mirth.

“Oh wow, you people are just too funny! Don’t worry about it, you can wash up here. And I’ll get someone to cook these right away.”

“Oh? Really?”

“You’d probably have a cold by the time you got to your inn, so I’ll have the lads boil some water for a bath. As for your clothes.. let me think..”

Lawrence pounced to keep Flynn from going overboard.

“It’s alright, I’ll run back to our inn and grab a change for them.”

“Oh? Alright then, let’s do that. The eels should be nice and cooked up by then. Let’s eat lunch at noon.”

Would Holo actually let her ears and tail be seen? Nah, she wasn’t that careless. She dragged Cole by the arm while Elsa tried to support him, until they disappeared into the room after Flynn. Holo was already so happy right now that Lawrence heard himself sigh in happiness. He really was stupid. She was more brilliant than the shiniest gold coin, and could chase away the darkest cloud in an instant. He scratched his head and stared at the eels with a stupid grin on his face.

“Alright, I’m heading out.”

He aimed his shout at Elsa, who was monitoring Holo and Cole with worried eyes. But just as soon as he turned his back, he heard her reply and her footsteps.

“I’m coming with you.”

An eel flicked some water out of the bucket as she passed by, and she flinched like she was being attacked by a sea monster. After tiptoeing around the bucket, she came up to Lawrence

with a look like she couldn't stand eels.

"I have spare clothes I can lend you."

It felt strange to receive that offer from Elsa, but Lawrence wasn't nearly as good as Holo was at detecting ulterior motives. He just nodded and kept walking, without saying a word.

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Just like any other town, the streets of Lenos had their own names. Big or small, it didn't matter. Each had a wooden plaque declaring its name, and the plaque for the small road they turned onto caught their eyes. It was a lovely sign, and the road was paved with cobblestones. Lawrence's eyes kept darting from stone to stone, until Elsa could take it no longer.

"I have been wondering this for some time.."

Lawrence suspected she was mumbling to herself, but she continued.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Wha?"

Lawrence couldn't believe what he was hearing, until Elsa looked him in the eyes and repeated herself plainly.

"Can I help the two of you in any way?"

Her honey-colored eyes were wholly serious.

"Especially you. I know you don't really want to go to Kinisen."

He stared right back and smiled.

"What a surprising thing to hear."

He figured she would get upset at that, but she didn't react with the kind of anger he expected.

"Don't even start."

She kept right on staring at him as they walked side by side down the crowded lane. She would have run smack into a wagon, had he not gently pulled her aside before replying. He didn't need the weight of having her run over on his mind.

"I'm always surprised when people say that."

Holo would have acted like a shy, flustered girl if he'd pulled her aside like that, but not Elsa. He knew she wouldn't, of course, but he still felt like Evan, the young miller, had bested him once again.

"But you helped me.."

It seemed that Elsa had put one and two together after hearing Lawrence and Holo talk. She knew they had to make a painful choice, and couldn't seem to make it themselves, and so she figured she could solve it by making it for them. It was sweetly innocent, and just the kind of thing he knew Elsa hid behind her cold exterior.

But she wasn't a businesswoman. Even if Eringin hadn't strong-armed him into going to Kinisen, she couldn't really help him.

"I do thank you for the offer, though."

He smiled sincerely, but offered no reason for his rejection. He really did feel grateful that she offered, after all, and for all her antagonism, she didn't really hate Holo. This just wasn't a problem that could be solved; sometimes a person had to cooperate with their father's cold-blooded murderer, and hatred had to be set aside.

"I see.."

Her disappointment was obvious.

"Why do you even want to help us, anyway?"

It was a pointless question, of course. Elsa *was* a firm believer, and so helping others was just part of her being. But his sixth sense as a merchant forced him to ask that question anyhow. There was one situation where his ears were more than a match for Holo's, and that was when someone had a self-interested ulterior motive. He knew Elsa wasn't just being generously kind. This time, she became just as angry as he expected.

"For starters, the Church here doesn't treat me as a member of the clergy."

The church in Lenos wouldn't be very welcoming to guests like Elsa, especially right after the riot caused by the fur fiasco. Lawrence hesitated, wondering if he ought to offer words of comfort, but her embarrassed expression kept him from doing so.

"But the more important reason is that we are so alike."

"Alike?"

Now that really took him by surprise. She nodded and stared at him again.

“I mean it. What you feel is written plainly on your face, but you still force yourself to adhere to other principles when you speak.”

Priests had a knack for diving into the deepest parts of a person’s mind, finding whatever was splashing around, and then helping calm it. Elsa’s eyes were piercing his with just that kind of expression right now, so he nervously turned away.

“I left my village with just that kind of twisted two-facedness, so of course we are alike.”

When she nervously turned away as well, he was so curious that he instinctively studied the side of her face.

“But you have no choice.. you have to find a priest for your village, right?”

“Yes, and yet..”

She hesitated, despite despising hesitation.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

She looked up at him with fear in her eyes. He’d never seen her like this, not even during that situation in Tereo. She looked like she wanted badly to confess something, and that he was the only one she could possibly confess it to. If that was the situation, what kind of man would he be if he didn’t let her?

“This is really something I really should only tell God.”

He shot her a smile.

“Oh, that’s fine then. But I’ll be in heaven before you, so if you’d like, I can deliver it to Him personally for you.”

That was actually one of the funniest jokes a stingy merchant could tell a believer, and sure enough Elsa smiled in embarrassment. It was an awkward smile, but his joke still had its intended effect. She rubbed her face and lowered her head in silent prayer.

“I want a priest to come to take my place in Tereo because I don’t want to be one anymore.”

Lawrence kept his own emotions in check, knowing that his role in a confession was to listen. He took a breath and calmly urged her to continue.

“Because?”

“I am studying to become a priest now, but my real wish..”

She looked up, every bit the innocent girl she should be at her age. Tears were welling up in her eyes, and her mask of toughness was completely in shambles. This wasn't something anyone should be seeing. Only Evan should be privy to this. Lawrence saw how tightly she held the mail stamp she carried.. it was the stamp Evan had given her when she left on her mission.

“..my hope.. is that one day I can be with Evan..”

Lawrence placed his finger in front of her mouth to make her pause, and then sighed.

“Just tell him the following.”

The clergy couldn't marry. And if there was a church in a village, it needed a priest. Elsa herself had long been fulfilling that obligation. But that didn't mean it was her calling to be alone forever. Principles and the truth were two very different things. Still, Elsa had heard Lawrence and Holo talking, and knew their situations were alike, so Lawrence was far too embarrassed to look her in the eye while he spoke his advice.

“And then..”

He finished his speech, doing his damndest to maintain the dignity necessary for a man in his position. He then looked up and sighed. Elsa slowly calmed herself as well, and finally replied.

“Thank you. I'm so happy to hear that from you.”

She looked at him, clearly showing the emotion she had been bottling in all this time. She then sighed as if disappointed in herself for not being strong enough, so Lawrence spoke up.

“We merchants are a stubborn lot. What we borrow, we must return. It's rare for us to speak the way I did just now.”

That's why he wanted to tie the one he loved to him, like a miser guarding his hoard. He debated saying that out loud, but stopped when he saw the look on her face. She nodded, trying to accept his words. Her smile had an ugly tinge to it.

Just then, the noon bell tolled, and as it faded away he decided to continue.

“You know, your relationship with Evan is quite plain to see.”

“Did we look like we were trying to hide it?”

She was trying to make it seem like she was surprised to hear him say that, but he just smiled at the truth. She coughed, clearly trying to conceal her embarrassment from all of this confessing.

“Even if I cannot solve your problem, I am still clergy. I can still offer you my services. And-”

She squinted.

“-you now owe *me* a confession.”

So that was her game? It was quite a clumsy attempt, but she had clearly been trying her best for his sake. And she clearly wasn't just acting, her confession had to be true. She couldn't very well bend her principles and still hope to help others, but apparently as a clergywoman she also couldn't help but be nosy.

“Yeah, you're right.”

He raised his hands in surrender, and she cleared her throat.

“To be frank, you two don't act normally.”

She was cutting to the chase so quickly that he couldn't help but felt uncomfortable.

“Well, I'm a human, and she's a wolf. We're far from normal to begin with.”

Elsa recoiled in shock, but still didn't back down.

“That's not what I mean.”

“What *do* you mean?”

She pressed on.

“You two clearly love each other, so why can't you hold hands?”

Lawrence seized up, unable to defend himself against such an attack. He wasn't angry, but he couldn't hide his embarrassment.. especially not now that his hand had instinctively shot up and covered half of his face.

“It makes no sense. You can make all the claims you want about her being a wolf, but my father's books make it clear that there are many stories like yours..”

Lawrence nervously tried to get her to stop. He wanted to bury himself in a hole right now. He couldn't even look her in the eye. He ended up turning away from her until he managed to calm down.

It wasn't until recently that he realized just how weak he was when it came to such topics. He couldn't bear to be seen right now, and he was already waiting for the inevitable laughter at his pathetic nature. It didn't have to be Holo laughing, after all.

“..Sorry..”

After what felt like an eternity, he finally managed to squeeze that out in his merchant's tone. His back was covered in a cold sweat, and his face was burning. Just hearing someone else point out that they obviously loved each other was so devastating it felt like he was some useless lump of a man from some comedy.

"But you see, Miss Elsa, we live in the real world. I can't exist in two places at once. Just holding hands can't solve our problems."

In the end, going to Kinisen was that correct course. It was so obvious that a merchant would clap at Holo for being logical.

"And so that's it? You won't even fight? You'll just give up without trying? You'll-"

"I!"

Lawrence didn't know just how many horrible things he'd managed to keep from blurting out. But he hadn't been able to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing the collar of Elsa's robe.

"..Sorry..."

The instant he realized where his hand was, he released her. Elsa didn't move to straighten her collar. She continuing staring into his eyes. Her anger wasn't born from his violence, but because he was desperately trying to forcing himself to go against his own wishes, no matter how much he didn't want to.

"I.. *have* tried.."

"Have you?"

She didn't waste a moment. He looked at her, not even capable of anger now that he'd wasted all of his energy.

"I.. don't even know anymore."

He then walked onward, leaving Elsa awestruck at his odd answer. But she quickly ran up to him again.

"What does *that* mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. I tried to get her to let me take her home, but reality won't let me. And reality dictates that this is the most sound decision. For me, for her and for Cole."

He was being an adult about it.. maybe that was the best way to put it. But Elsa was already

unable to figure out what to say, and just hung her head sadly.

Of course Lawrence didn't want this. He'd even demanded that Holo go with him to Yoitsu. But her reasoning was airtight. He couldn't convince her, not with all of his willpower. And the more he tried, the more he hurt her.

It was only when a person believed there was a perfect solution that they could plow ahead with it, knowing that life would go on happily. But Holo's tired face said it all, when she explained that time dragged on more and more the older she got. When a person threw everything away, and had nothing to lose, all that was left was a horribly long life.

Lawrence and Elsa silently trudged on. Soon enough, they were at the inn. The first floor was crawling with workers and travelers eating their lunches while wearing various expressions.. some happy, some not happy.

People lived by their own experiences; that's just how it was. Perpetual happiness was not an option. If you couldn't compromise, you wouldn't want to carry on living. Only heroes could win and go back home after facing their trials.

But not everyone facing their trials would become a hero. Most of them died somewhere in the middle of their journey. Only by being careful could that journey be extended and, as a merchant, Lawrence knew that well. His kind was much more careful than most.

He walked up the stairs quietly, no longer hearing their loudness, but his softness. Elsa followed closely behind him. Now everyone would pity him, and he'd never be able to live this down. But the reality was that he already pitied himself anyway. He smiled derisively at himself, but as he did-

"You can't create another miracle?"

She was being blunt again.

"You can't create another miracle?"

She repeated herself as he silently turned around. She was standing in the corner where the staircase turned, looking up at him.

"You saved my village with a miracle, but if you can't do that for yourself.."

She stopped talking for a moment, like she was holding back tears.

"..and God won't create one for you.. then how can I possibly go on spreading His word to others?"

She was staring at Lawrence, but not with hostility. He scratched his head and turned away.

This girl was such a pure and devout believer that it was unbelievable.

“I know I’m awful for saying that, but-”

“No, you’re certainly not awful. But we.. well.. *I’m* just not pure enough to be saved by a miracle.”

He walked back down the stairs and stooped down to straighten the collar he had vented his frustration on. She didn’t brush his hand away, nor look at him with contempt. All she did was watch him.

“I just learned that there is a band of mercenaries near her home, called the Myuri Mercenary Band.”

Elsa didn’t even flinch at his sudden change in topic. He made sure her collar was perfect, then tapped her shoulder to get her to move again.

“And guess what? Myuri is her old friend’s name. From home, several centuries ago. We both thought he died long ago.”

Lawrence didn’t have the heart to look back at her as he spoke. He had no way of knowing what look she would be wearing now but he figured it wouldn’t have changed anyhow.

“And now it turns out he might still be alive. But I haven’t told her yet. I’m planning on telling her when we part ways in Kinisen.”

“Why?”

He heard her small voice ask his back.

“Because I want her heart focused on me for this one last trip. After all, mercenary bands never name themselves after a woman. So, like the idiot that I am, I’m jealous. And well.. since this confession’s come this far, I might as well just flat-out ask.”

He gripped the knob of their door as he turned back to Elsa.

“After wishing that her old friend had just stayed dead.. how can I still ask for a miracle?”

He sighed at himself and turned the doorknob. He actually wanted to dart into the room and lock the door behind himself.

“I’m evil. If I could really perform miracles, I’d never have to worry about it, but I can’t.”

He then began collecting Holo’s spare clothes. It then dawned on him that once she left, he would have to force himself to sell these.. articles that she had purchased without his

authorization. Elsa followed suit and began removing clothes from her bag.

“Yes, you are evil. And God will of course punish you for that.”

Even hearing that spoken so plainly sounded normal to Lawrence. He was still smiling, but he stood up, ready to leave the room. But Elsa wasn’t finished.

“But I still don’t understand.”

He turned to face her, and saw that she was showing her anger even more plainly on her face.

“You love her so much, so why are you still trying to be reasonable? It makes no sense. That’s what isn’t normal. You need to pick one or the other.”

“Please don’t push your luck.”

He knew how curt that was, so he smiled and tried to politely soften the blow.

“In the end this is still our problem, and still our decision. Even a servant of God has to respect that.”

It sounded like the weak excuse it really was. He was really glad that Elsa was going this far for him. But there were limits to his tolerance.

“You’re right.”

Elsa stopped and inhaled. As she exhaled, tears spilled from her eyes.

“But I still want to repay your kindness. You may not be willing to make a decision, but.. at least..”

“I may not be willing, but *she* sure is.”

Lawrence was the only stubborn one about their relationship. He wanted to take her to Yoitsu so much that it hurt, but Holo.. she wanted to be rational so badly she practically set her decision in stone. What he felt just wasn’t as important.

Elsa could say they loved each other with a straight face, but Lawrence was no longer sure. He might even look back on this with a sarcastic smirk in the future. Even just mentioning Myuri had sent a shiver down his spine. And Elsa had noticed that. Her eyes were like the fiery gems people put on the hilts of valuable swords, and reflected the fire in her heart just as powerfully.

“That makes even less sense. Are you both just afraid to make a mistake?”

Lawrence didn’t understand.

“You’re both deliberately keeping your distance, just like Evan does. That even makes the people watching you angry, you know! Why not just be true to yourselves? Do you think compromising means letting her make all the decisions? God will side with whoever’s right, so what are you afraid of!?”

She was getting angrier and angrier as she spoke, until she was panting so fiercely her shoulders were rising and falling with her breaths. On the surface her words sounded reasonable, but they were a disorganized mess. It was like she didn’t even know what she wanted to say. In fact, she might have just been deliberately getting all of her thoughts out at once.



But Lawrence understood her somehow. It wasn't just that she had a lot of things to say. Her key point was that if he always just listened to Holo, no matter how reasonable she sounded, he was really just using her as an excuse. In the end, the more wisely he tried to act for her sake, the more stupid he became.

"I see.. you're quite right about that."

He had no strength to put any emotion behind his words, but they still came from his heart.

"But what can a merchant like me do about that?"

"Just use your own brain."

It seemed like Elsa had lost track of what she was even angry about. She still stared him down and continued her assault, however.

"Forget praying, just think! If you feel that you don't deserve God's grace, then why bother praying? You're a merchant, so act like one!"

He never expected to hear her say something like that. She was so concerned about Lawrence and Holo that she was willing to put her own faith aside for their sake.

"You merchants are tricksters, aren't you? Almost like magicians? Then go ahead and be as evil as you have to be, and don't worry about it!"

She stood tall and looked at him with the most determined expression he'd ever seen her make.

"Besides, I guarantee that a man like you will never violate God's teachings anyhow!"

The only response he could possibly give now was to laugh her words off. If you asked a hundred merchants whether Holo was right, they would say yes, and twenty others would join them. Most of them would also hand Elsa a glass of wine and ask her to calm down a little.

But not Lawrence. Elsa patiently waited for him. She wasn't stupid; she knew Holo's choice was rational. But it was rational to a fault, considering Lawrence's feelings. She just couldn't agree that it was correct. If Elsa felt that strongly than he owed it to her to try bending her words the same way he bent Holo's.

So, he could be as evil as he wanted, and Elsa would help him when God came for an explanation. The normal course was to give up when things were hopeless, but a merchant would never give up hope when the profit was this important. His goal was simple: to get that company to sell him the book without having to go to Kinisen.

Could he kidnap the owner's wife or daughter? Threaten them with black magic? Hire

mercenaries to put pressure on them? It was liberating to throw his morals out the window (and just as interesting) but Elsa had misunderstood a key point. Merchants weren't magicians.

Money orders were painfully down-to-earth things. They were hardly amazing. Merchants used the mundane in magical ways, so it only appeared like money was trading hands invisibly. That's why people sometimes mistook them for tricksters and sorcerers, but it wasn't like they were breaking the rules of reality.

And yet, that gave him an idea: what if he let the credit flow the other way? It was such a strange concept that his brain had to chew on it for a while. Elsa began to worry that something was wrong, but he politely shushed her and kept thinking. Was going to Kinisen really the only way to buy the book? No, he'd surely been missing something.

It suddenly felt like there were keys everywhere in Lenos, ones capable of unlocking the gates for him to travel north with Holo. His heart was beating furiously as he tried to collect his thoughts and memories. He stared at Elsa, who recoiled in terror. That was strange.. he'd never seen her that way before. Oh, of course.. anyone would recoil from the smile he had on his face right now.

"Hey.. if I came up with something like a miracle.. should I go ahead and try it?"

That was the first time he'd ever sincerely asked someone whether he should go ahead with something. It was such an unnerving sensation that he was lucky he didn't bite his tongue.

"..I.. I wish you luck.."

Even when terrified, Elsa was a top-notch priestess. Lawrence couldn't let her efforts go to waste. In a twisted and mean way, his idea was actually pretty funny. If Elsa hadn't pushed him this far, he would have just laughed it off entirely.

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No one was at Flynn's shop when they returned. The door to the courtyard was still open, however, so Lawrence popped his head through. He immediately felt the heat from a stove that had been set up there.

"Oh? You two sure were quick. We're not ready yet, so go back in and wait for us."

Lawrence wasn't sure if Flynn even knew the people around him, though several of them were carving eels and at least seemed like cooks. The other lads also seemed quite busy, so Lawrence nodded and headed back to Elsa. She stared at him, obviously still concerned.

"Thanks for the encouragement."

She thought he was joking around, and recoiled in fear. Her mouth was wired shut as she stared at him.

“I mean it. Without you, I wouldn’t have been able to think of this. Maybe I’m just getting old?”

He smiled and took a deep breath before walking past her.

“In his letter, my father wrote to tell me..”

He listened to her speaking behind him.

“..that he wanted me to go as I wished. In his library were many stories about ordinary futures born of compromise. But so few of them had happy endings..”

Elsa held Evan’s stamp tightly again, and did her best to put on a joking smile and tone.

“..unless they were earned through failure.”

Even a successful trade was usually born of someone trying and failing in some way, so Lawrence was intimately familiar with this line of thinking.

“We call that reality.”

He quickly navigated the cleanest-looking corridor. It was the one that seemed the best-ventilated, the widest and brightest. It was even brighter than the part of the shop meant to invite customers. It was the type of environment where voices would seem more cheerful, and sure enough, the happy voices being heard now belonged to Holo and Cole.

Lawrence and Elsa took several more steps and stopped in front of a room. Its floor was a bit lower than the rest of the halls and rooms, and it seemed to be some sort of kitchen, complete with stoves. Holo and Cole’s fishy clothes were neatly folded over the open door.

Lawrence pushed that door further open and peeked behind it, just in time to spy Holo splashing hot water onto the nude form of Cole with a large ladle.

“Oh, come on! The water in Nyohilla is a hundred times hotter than this!”

There she was, lying to gullible kids again. Thankfully, Cole was trying to fight back with his own ladle. They were both kids. Still, the moment Cole noticed Lawrence he nervously hid the ladle behind his back.. unlike Holo, whose greedy eyes shone like she’d spotted her next target.

“Jeez, get some towels on. You’re both going to catch a cold if you play around for too long. Got it?”

They must have been bathing for more than long enough, so Lawrence tossed two towels their

way. Cole nervously caught his with outstretched hands, but Holo just let hers flop over her head.

“Your change of clothes is waiting for you. Cole, Elsa is lending you some of hers, so make sure to thank her.”

“Yes!”

It was a model reply, or would have been, if he hadn’t sneezed at the end. But he still got a passing grade, because that was just what one would expect seeing him sitting there in the buff. He quickly wiped himself dry and went off in search of his clothes.

“You too.”

Holo heaved a vast, bored sigh. Only her tail betrayed the fact that she was happy.

“Honestly. I take it no one saw your tail, at least?”

That was splashing water everywhere right now as she just coyly wrung her hair out. She turned to him, like her mission in life was to flood the room.

“I am hardly that foolish- ah~choo!”

Her fine figure and pale skin looked as beautiful as a polished pearl as she stood there, glistening. What a shame that she had to sneeze like a little kid and ruin the whole effect. Lawrence returned her vast sigh and began properly tending to her hair.

“Is lunch ready yet?”

“The fires are seeing to that, but it seems it’ll be a while yet.”

“Mm. The dock workers told me that they would be tastiest if we drizzled them lightly with oil and roasted them.”

Her hair was beyond lovely, but it was a real chore to dry. It was still wet after a monumental effort.

“This was not so bad, but Nyohilla is far better. Especially if you let some wine chill in the snow next to you. Now *that* is paradise.”

“Especially for the merchants, I’ll wager. Since everyone does that, they can charge whatever they want for the wine *and* the springs.”

When her hair was finally dry, Lawrence set her towel on her shoulder. She brushed her bangs playfully and hummed provocatively.

“Is that all? Please help me dry off.”

She looked up at him with her hand on her waist, and an evil smile on her face. If he looked away now it was over, so he chose to ignore it. He stared into her amber eyes and then slowly shut his.

“Dry yourself off already, and get your clothes on. They’re right outside.”

He could practically hear her pouting. If she wanted their trip to end then why was she acting this way now, of all times? Because she was a born actress who could read him like a book, of course. She frowned as her hands reached for her towel.

“And what would you like me to do after I am clothed?”

He was ready for her question.

“Help me find Lou.”

Everyone in Lenos was hoarding goods right now, so someone like Lou (with no real connections in the city), would be completely in over his head trying to buy the provisions they needed for their trip. Of course, Lawrence wasn’t doing this out of the goodness of his heart. And sure enough, Holo regarded him doubtfully.



“What for?”

A drop of water fell from her nose. The air around them had cooled, as had the water, so she was probably quite cold right now. She seemed to be putting all of that coldness into her icy stare.

“Somewhere near Yoitsu..”

He brought his head down to hers, and nearly set it on her shoulder.

“..there is a band of mercenaries.”

“What?”

“Their name is.. the Myuri Mercenary Band.”

His behavior had already surprised her, but now she was downright stunned. And yet, people’s minds became strangely clear when they were as stunned as she was.

“So help me find Lou, before it’s too late.”

He averted his eyes and turned around like that was all there was to discuss, but she grabbed his collar from behind. He turned back around, but she wasn’t upset.

“Why do you want to find that guy?”

“Our plans have changed.”

Her fangs immediately bared, and she was already hyperventilating, but before she snapped he gently reached his hand out to her face.

“Don’t worry, not that much.”

He crouched down slightly so his eyes were level with her red and amber ones; the ones he could lose himself in.

“I’m a merchant, keeping promises is what I do.”

His double meaning was clear, so he stood back up and continued calmly.

“I just need to alter our plans slightly, to account for this new information.”

“Are you planning-”

Her voice cut off for a moment. Her hand was shaking like she was charging herself for her next

attack.

“Are you planning to not go to Kinisen?”

“Perhaps.”

She put on a look of pure hatred; the kind she always put on when she suspected he was doing something stupid against her will. But he knew what that face really meant: she was suppressing her tears.

“..you are..”

“Yeah, I’m jealous.”

He casually beat her to it.

“I’m jealous because it’s Myuri. What of it?”

She lost all signs of emotion for a moment, unable to say a word.

“Unless you’re saying Myuri’s a girl? If that’s the case, then I’m just joking.”

He stared right back at her until she looked away, slowly shaking her head.

“No.. but my relationship with Myuri is not what you seem to think it is-”

“Even so, I can’t just ride away on my wagon while you hop off to meet him.”

He held her tiny hand in his, warming it as best he could as he dried her neck with her towel.

“Then what exactly are you.. changing..?”

“I’m just setting it up so that we don’t have to go to Kinisen to get the book. That’s why we have to find Lou right away. Oh, and in case you’re worried, Elsa and Cole still won’t end up in Yoitsu.”

The towel suddenly hung over empty air as he lowered it to dry her shoulder.

“Are you.. sure it will work?”

She couldn’t abide a single mistake. Her tense glare made that perfectly clear. But he chuckled. At first, he wasn’t quite sure why he chuckled, though, or why he began talking in a sarcastic tone.

“We can only pray. After all..”

After saying that, he realized that he was actually laughing at himself.

“A foolish merchant like me would rather make a small mistake than a big one.”

Holo cringed in revulsion, like she did when she bit into liver, and when her eyes snapped back up to meet his they were full of pure loathing. It was her usual prelude to saying “foolish mule,” and sure enough-

“Foolish mule.”

This time he laughed raucously and nodded in agreement.

“It’s true. If we fail this time, I’ll have to give up.”

He was already habitually looking at her to reassure her lie-detecting ears that he was not lying. But that just made her head slump down even lower. Clearly she was dubious. After all, he did imply that his plan still had room for a small mistake.. how could he even suggest that? He cleared his throat.

“Do you think I’ve grown at all?”

He’d spent all this time risking life and livelihood just to keep her safe and happy with him. And this plan would continue that trend, all the way to the end of their travels. She stared at his smile, unable to laugh or even get angry. Her head remained slumped over powerlessly, like she was even beyond sighing. It was nearly touching his chest.

“Fool.”

That soft complaint was followed by a sigh. She picked up the towel, which had dropped to the floor, and wrapped it around herself before complaining some more.

“Such a fool.”

He watched her dry herself thinking “I truly, truly am,” but he could afford to feel relaxed for now. Elsa’s suggestion was right; being evil was certainly far easier.

Holo finally stepped out of the tub of water and flung her towel at him as she walked away. Her tail was swollen, but he suspected it was because she’d finally stepped out into the cold.

“Then you wish to look for that meat bun right now, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Honestly. This had better not keep me from lunch.”

She sighed like she already suspected that it would.

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Lou was quite animal-like. Not his looks of course, but his senses. For a book dealer busily bargaining on the loading dock of a random company, he sure seemed to hear Lawrence's footsteps quickly. This wasn't a quiet place, either. Workers were shouting, horses were neighing, and merchants were raising their voices. It was quite a mess, in fact.

"I sure don't like the look on your face."

He still cracked wise, but this time he wasn't smiling.

"At least that's what it seems I should be saying."

Judging by his friendly tone, he was probably being careful around Holo. Otherwise he would have dropped the act and regarded Lawrence as a tough enemy.

"Well at least we don't have to worry about supplies. I managed to buy lots."

His lips barely finished moving before he turned back around to the merchant he was dealing with.

"Forget it."

But the man didn't want to sell to Lou anymore. He waved his hands in displeasure and left.

"Of course he'd react that way. Anyone would, seeing a man with a face like that, with a girl standing next to him."

"I'm quite used to that reaction, yes."

There was no hesitation in Lawrence's voice as he shrugged and replied.

"Does that mean you're looking for me because you're backing down?"

Backing down in the middle of a deal was heresy in the business world. Failure was downright respectable by comparison.

"Of course not."

"Then what is it?"

"I've just received word of something incredibly urgent. So urgent that I won't be able to join

you to Kinisen.”

He led Lou away to a quiet location. They walked past Holo, who followed them.

“You’re joking, right?”

“That’s exactly how she reacted.”

Lou quickly shut his mouth and stared at Lawrence. But he couldn’t just accept this, not without knowing what Lawrence was after.

“Let me cut to the chase. I stand to earn a good thousand Trenni silvers from this.”

Lou declared it like a mercenary patting himself on the back for killing a bear with his bare hands. It made Lawrence grin, but not in mockery. Again, he was laughing at himself. This time, for passing up such an exciting deal just because he was jealous. He really was crazy.

“So I’m sorry, but I won’t let you back down. We have a deal.”

Lou was so mistaken that Lawrence had to cough and sigh to keep from laughing.

“Look, that company in Kinisen has a working relationship with Delink.. and quite a good one, right?”

They were looking to buy girls with tan skin, after all. Delink wouldn’t even give them the time of day if they weren’t a serious customer. And no small company could afford to place such an “order.” Lou was so utterly lost that he couldn’t help but be wary, but he still let Lawrence continue with a nod.

“That means they must deal with a lot of other companies. Still with me?”

“Yeah.. what of it?”

Lou’s anxiety was palpable, but Lawrence wasn’t going to reveal his ace just yet. He tilted his head slightly and continued.

“Then I can still be there to help you without *actually* being there to help you.”

Lou froze in his tracks and stared dubiously at Lawrence. He was clearly trying to analyze what Lawrence could possibly mean by that. Lawrence looked away, squinting as if he was looking at the sun.

“With money orders.”

“Money orders? But how? They’re not magic, they’re just a way to transfer funds.”

Holo lagged behind them, looking utterly bored.

“Not if we make a mess of them.”

Lawrence walked on after saying that. Lou was bewildered, but still chose to follow him. Lawrence knew he had him now. He’d won the moment Lou had taken that first step after him.

“Mr. Lawrence, you’re making no sense.”

Curiosity had indeed killed the cat. Humans just couldn’t help themselves when it came to learning something that sounded *this* conniving. Lawrence looked back at Lou.

“Why not issue a bunch of smaller money orders from lots of companies, rather than one big one?”

“Huh?”

“Our minimum is thirty Lumione, but this way they’ll easily top a hundred.. maybe even two hundred.”

Lawrence was impressed that he could smile so naturally right now. After all, this plan hinged on them having more capital than Delink had offered, and only the richest companies could offer more than they had put on the table.

“Think about it. We make a bunch of money orders with different terms. The company will have no reason to suspect its all us; it’ll just be business as usual at first. By the time they get suspicious it’ll already be too late.. they won’t be able to cash them in anymore, because no one will have any money to honor them. With all those customers and employees screaming to be paid, even the biggest company could be brought to its knees.”

Lou’s lumpy, doughy face quickly tightened up into one that looked like it was carved out of rock salt.

“And that’s where we’d come in, just in the nick of time. We’d save them by taking those money orders off their hands for cash. Naturally, we’d only do that if there was something in it for us..”

Of course, all of the money orders would be issued by Delink, so Lou wouldn’t even need to worry about the cash. The trap could be set right away. All that remained to be seen was whether Lou had the courage to set it.

“That’s where I come in, saying I’ll take a look at their books as compensation?”

“Exactly.”

Lawrence smiled like the savviest marketer, and Lou stared back in abject terror. He was stunned. He really couldn't seem to believe that Lawrence would risk doing something so incredibly self-destructive to his reputation as a merchant. But the plan was theoretically sound, and its few flaws could be ironed out.

"I.. see. But.. do you really think Delink will agree to this?"

Lou wasn't worried whether they'd be concerned about their own reputation. After all, they'd just be mediating for a bunch of companies wanting money orders. No fuss, no muss. But Delink had to invest a lot more money than they'd offered if this plan was going to work.

"They should. I mean, cash *is* a hot commodity in Lenos right now."

"Ah!"

That was the sound of Lou putting two and two together. It was true, Delink could earn a *lot* with exchange rate shenanigans if they did this.

"Kinisen's situation is different enough that it's certainly worth their while. I mean, I don't think I need to break out an abacus to show you just how much they could make, do I?"

Lou smacked his forehead and looked away sheepishly. He was groaning, though, so Lawrence could tell he was just playing along. After all, if Delink took the plunge, he wouldn't have to worry about how to convince the other company to sell their book.

Not having to worry about something like that was a godsend for a lonely traveling merchant, especially one who would soon have to worry about it. Doubly so for someone like Lou, who had just felt the stinging sensation of loss, having uselessly dragged Bibles to Lenos. This kind of assurance would be gold to him.

Regardless, Lou looked up at Lawrence like he still needed a bit more of a push.

"Then.. should we really do this?"

He was hooked.

"Yes."

Lawrence's short answer left no room for the book dealer to do anything but nod.

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They went to Delink straight away, knowing better than to dally when changing such a big plan. They also knew better than to think that Delink would just accept the proposed changes, like

mere passengers in a flying carriage.

Lawrence would certainly never underestimate someone like Eringin. He'd already changed plans on them once, and bought Holo back from them immediately after putting her up as collateral. As if that wasn't enough, all four of Delink Company's leaders were present now, so there would be no second chances or nervous backpedaling this time.

Not that Lawrence planned on doing anything less than his best. "Regret" just wasn't the kind of word he wanted to say in the same sentence as "Delink." That's why he kept Lou silent and did all of the talking himself this time, right down to the details. He needed to make it clear that he didn't have to go Kinisen to make their plan work.

Unnervingly, none of the four masters frowned at him as he spoke. Not even Eringin. They just kept their hands on their desks until he was done. Not until Lawrence finished did Eringin speak, and he had but one thing to say.

"Make it so."

Lawrence couldn't believe his ears. He had to make sure he'd heard correctly.

"Really?"

Eringin feigned surprise, like he couldn't believe Lawrence was flabbergasted.

"Well, um, of course I'm thrilled that you've accepted.. but there's still a few problems.."

"Namely, that you don't want to go to Kinisen yourself, yes?"

Oh, of course.. with Flynn asking around, and Holo with him now, it was all too obvious. Eringin grinned like he'd seen through him from the start.

"This was your plan in the first place, Mr. Lawrence. As long as our concerns are met, then we have no real reason to refuse your proposed changes. It's not as though we haven't thought of this before."

"!"

Lawrence wasn't the only one who was shocked to hear that; Lou's jaw literally dropped.

"But no normal person would want to be part of a plan that involved harming others, and they certainly wouldn't come up with it in the first place. So we knew that if we suggested it from the start, you'd never agree."

Incredible. Lawrence was so taken aback he thought Eringin was joking around.. but his smile made it clear that he wasn't.

“It almost seems like you’re a bit older and wiser, now that you’re actually able to consider the nasty side of life without getting all choked up. Doesn’t it?”

Only Holo was able to smile when she heard Eringin say that. The slave trader smiled right back at her and continued.

“There aren’t a lot of ways for a man to stay young. Bringing her along was a fine choice, to be sure.”

Eringin then stared into Lawrence’s eyes, making Lawrence wonder what he could possibly say. But he did feel like Eringin was at least trying to be conciliatory.

“The moment I saw her come in, I knew all I needed to know about you two. Two people can make it, even if they only have three feet between them, as they say.”

“But don’t forget that there are four of us.”

Another of the bosses couldn’t resist chiming in. It seemed they needed to make it clear that Eringin wasn’t the only one who had made this choice.

“That is, we agree with your choice of strategy, but we’re going to take care of the details. Agreed?”

Eringin spoke like this was business as usual for him. He was the one who best understood how cash flowed between the companies, and just how much of a light touch these kinds of underhanded tactics required. There was no way Lawrence would have said no.

Now all that was left to worry about was Lou. He was the one who had be the villain here. When Eringin said they hadn’t suggested this version of the plan the first time around, it wasn’t really because of Lawrence, but Lou.

“This is a huge opportunity for us all, but our target is just as wily.”

They each took turns shaking hands above the table, re-sealing their altered deal. Shaking hands before signing a contract was something slave traders didn’t usually do. Like Flynn, their business model just didn’t allow it.

“Now we pray for God’s blessing.”

With that, their meeting ended. Lou’s face looked like it was cramped up from all his forced smiling. He looked terrified that it had come to this, and Lawrence also wanted to say what was on his mind: “now we have to actually pull this off.” But in reality it was all on Lou’s shoulders now. He was the one who was going to Kinisen, and he was the one who had to make the actual deal.

“Hey, about the introduction fee..”

Lawrence finally broached the subject as they left the room into a quieter hallway.

“I’d rather not talk about it now.”

“Ah, alright. We can deal it outside.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I mean.”

Lou looked around nervously, even though Eringin and his partners hadn’t ended their own meeting yet. The only Delink representative within earshot was a another sharp-looking kid standing by the door.

“But-”

“I mean, let’s leave that for when this whole thing’s over.”

Lou put on a sneer like he just wanted to get back at Lawrence.

“No, not because I’ll be the bad guy, or because you’re leaving me on my own. But I just know you’re going to waive the fee in the end. You see, I’m not Flynn..”

He put on the most innocent, child-like smile he could.

“I actually want to build a connection between us. You? Just a traveling merchant? Don’t make me laugh.”

Back when Lawrence was hunting for fallen coins in the sewers, he desperately longed to hear that comment directed at him one day. What a shame that it wasn’t even a distant second for him anymore. Holo didn’t seem to want to get in the way, and kept her distance. Lawrence eyed her as he replied.

“No kidding. I sure am one hell of an abysmal traveling merchant.”

Lou gave a mighty laugh, but Holo didn’t even crack a smile. She might be having trouble deciding which upset her more.. Lawrence being jealous about her friend, or him going against her wishes again. But she certainly didn’t seem angry. In fact, it looked more like she felt there was nothing she could do about him. But only a fool would ask her about that, unless they had a death wish.

“After all, it seems like I have a thing for forcing people to do my bidding.”

Holo smiled under her hood, making Lawrence feel even worse about himself. It seemed that

for all Lou's bravado, acting, and sizing up of Lawrence when they first met in Flynn's shop, it was Lawrence who ended up wrangling the situation to his advantage.

"Well, that's right up my alley. I love my challenges like I love my profits: the bigger they are, the greater my sense of satisfaction in the end."

Elsa's evaluation of Lou had been spot on. His loyalty to his own greed was such that he could actually be trusted, in a twisted kind of way. Lawrence found himself nodding.

"I'm looking forward to seeing just how you rise to this challenge."

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## Epilogue

Lou was even happier to hear that Flynn was roasting eels for lunch than Holo was. His first response was an immediate suggestion.

“Then we need to go get some liquor! The eels in Lenos are amazing with the right drink, and we still have to celebrate our contract.. well, our amended contract.”

His half-sincerity forced a smile out of Lawrence.

“But we’ve already pitched in the eels for lunch..”

“Oh don’t worry, the liquor will be my treat! Well, as long as you share something off your wagon, too.”

Since Lawrence’s wagon was mostly hauling freebies from Hugh, he immediately accepted.

“Alright then.”

“You can count on me! You two head back first, and make sure there’s plenty of eel left for me!”

Lou quickly vanished, and half the noise of the road seemed to vanish with him. Was he just born to play that loud a role? Lawrence wasn't sure, but it was painfully clear that Lou was never going to stop playing it. But as they walked on, Holo finally opened her own mouth.

“Finally we are free of that burden.”

She practically dripped with sarcasm, clearly speaking on both her behalf and Lawrence’s. But he still smiled when he considered that almost everything they’d ever experienced in Lenos had indeed been a burden.

“Well, it’s an unspoken rule for merchants to travel as light as possible.”

“Hmph.”

She finally let her displeasure clearly show, but didn’t refuse his outstretched hand. Her displeasure stemmed from his unwillingness to accept her terms, though, so he didn’t have any right to be unpleasant to her in turn. Besides, he had time to beg forgiveness from God. The steeple of the Lenos church always stared down on everyone, almost no matter where they went.

“Do you feel that way will be shorter? It is far too crowded on the main streets.”

She was pointing into the same alley Lawrence had been thinking of suggesting. They didn't need the warmth of liquor this time, and it would be unsightly for them to come back to Flynn's already drunk. As they ducked into the alley, it struck them just how different the silence was compared to the haunting variety in the Delink Company.

Lawrence could finally relax, and so could Holo. The alley may be narrow, but it was well-kept. It was just the kind of comfortable alley that Lawrence liked; the kind that reminded him of a humble, but successful life.

He couldn't claim to have lost his interest in big and risky deals, but he was back to being happy with the smaller and stabler ones again. He could go back to Yoitsu with Holo now, and not have to worry about how her reunion with Myuri would end up. Their end could be a happy one, and he could finally do what he had to do, and resume his traveling merchantry.

Holo had once said that a good joke lasted fifty years, and he could rest assured that she would remember the joke named "Lawrence" for far longer. The time they spent should certainly be enough to keep them smiling until their eventual reunion, however distant in the future.

Lawrence had done everything he could, so he didn't have to worry about regrets. He could look back in satisfaction. Just as he reached this conclusion, Holo spoke like she had been listening in on his thoughts.

"Hey.. you.."

"Hmm?"

She looked embarrassed enough to be glad her face was under a hood.

"I need to know.."

Now he was curious.

"Know what?"

"Um.. why did you insist so much on going back with me?"

Did that really need to be asked? From the look on her face, he must have a strange look on his.

"Oh, do not look at me like that. I truly do not understand you. You are not that stupid. You understood my words, but you rejected my plan like it was the end of the world. At first when you said you were jealous, I almost believed you.. but that feeling came later, did it not? Before that, you felt just as strongly. But I just cannot fathom why.."

She couldn't quite bring herself to finish after looking at him again. That was new. Did he really

look that horrible? He instinctively touched his face to try to feel what was so strange about it.

“Was my reaction.. really that strange?”

He didn’t mean his face, of course. And she knew that. But she still hesitated and continued, instead of joking.

“Yes, incredibly so.”

“..”

Now he was completely lost. He wasn’t even sure if he was more disappointed to hear that, or more disappointed that she wasn’t happy with his hard work.

But he already knew she wasn’t happy with his decision. It was hearing that she was just as confused by him as he was with her that made his mind go blank. So blank that he worried he might have gone invisible.

He was but a sheet of paper, barely able to stand on its own power.. even the slightest draft and he would fly off into the sky.

“Hey, I have said it several times, have I not? None of us are dying, so there is no reason to be so serious?”

Any man asked into an alley by a girl like her would be unable to answer that question. It wasn’t just because it felt like tempting fate to answer her honestly, but because he felt he couldn’t say it without being a disgrace to men everywhere.

True, no one was dying, and not seeing someone for several years was nothing new to a merchant. But it felt like he would die if he wouldn’t see for her for that long. Of course he knew he wouldn’t, but this wasn’t rational.

Was it because she wasn’t human, and so his love was more profound than a man’s love for a woman? If he couldn’t even answer that much, what hope did he have to answer her question? As if that wasn’t enough of a problem, it seemed she wasn’t even through talking yet.

“I simply cannot believe that you are so wrong about this. Do you really not understand?”

He clearly didn’t understand. He loved her, and thought she loved him. That was his only wish, in fact. Earlier, Elsa had accused him of being wrong as well. But why? He was so used to being told he was wrong and having no idea why, that it almost felt like he was doomed to always feel that way.

“It truly pains me to have to say this, especially after you have already hurt me so much by implying that I intended to leave you forever or something, but.. oh, must I spell *everything* out

for you!?”

He stared at her in utter amazement.

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘what!?’”

Spell everything out for him? Was this some sort of big secret she was bottling up? Lawrence was in way over his head now. All he knew was that she must mean it was something terribly important to him. There was no way he could back down now, so what the heck was she talking about?

The alley was dead silent, except for the sounds of their footsteps. He just held her hand, and put every single scrap of brainpower he had on this task. He was thinking even harder about it then he had about the Kinisen issue, but seeing that only made Holo angry enough to step in front of him and look into his eyes.

“Ah!”

“Oh!”

Their jaws both dropped, and not because of her action or each other’s reactions.

“Did you..”

“Really..?”

She stared at him in disbelief. His own hand shot up to his mouth and he looked away. No way! He couldn’t believe it, but what else could she be about to say? As her words re-ran in his mind, it became clearer and clearer that there was only one thing she could have meant. Even in the freezing weather, his face felt like it was going to burn away in embarrassment.. and Holo’s eyes looked the same way.

“I.. I see..”

She hadn’t spoken like this in a very long time. It sounded like she was trying to figure out just how many pieces to tear him into. He inched back like a child who had done something they shouldn’t have, but his fearful eyes couldn’t stop looking into hers. They shone right back, with an even stranger red and amber glow than usual for her “serious face.”

“Well, I do have to admit that I am obtuse.. oh ho ho ho..”

She was talking in the voice she used when she was about to swallow a cornered rabbit. He had no choice but to give up. He closed his eyes, ready for the end. The last time they were in

Lenos, and she suggested ending their travels, he'd taken her hand and declared his love to keep her with him. What had she replied? *Had* she even replied back then?

"Oh ho ho.. So you really *are* that stupid."

She wasn't going to hold back this time, but Lawrence had long ago prepared for the day when she would finally eat him alive in a rage. And yet..

"Hmph!"

His eyes were still closed when he heard her snort, and felt something slide into his arms.

"You thought I was just playing with you again?"

"..wha?"

He reopened one wary eye and stole a peek at her.

"Foolish mule."

He had unconsciously ducked, and she had stood on her toes, so they were both seeing eye-to-eye. He felt completely hopeless, but couldn't bear to move. They stayed next to each other for a very long time, until he realized that her smile had at some point changed into one of embarrassment.

"Jeez.. did you really lose all of your confidence because I was unclear? I really would have bitten you a moment ago if you were not such a.. merchant."

She complained right into his face.

"How can you be so forceful and manly in one second, yet so weak and flimsy in the next? Just what is wrong with you?"

"?"

He couldn't help but react with a hurtful glare. At first she seemed stunned, but then put on a look of pure hate.

"And you still have the gall to ask me to be more forceful and fight for Cole?"

Wait.. *that's* all she meant? Lawrence could feel his mind shutting down even as he stared at her.

"Oh.. of course.."

“Fool.”

Now she was getting really upset. In fact, it looked like she was going to burst into tears as they stared into each other’s eyes.

He’d practically begged her not to force herself to be a Wisewolf if it wasn’t what she wanted. He meant every word. He’d be there for her, even if it meant more work for him. She already knew why he was willing to be there for her. And he knew she was the same way.

It was too embarrassing to say it out loud, but he even knew that she would hunt him down again, once she’d had her fill of Yoitsu. But in the end, that apparently wasn’t what this was about.

She had lost her temper because she was losing Cole, and now she was losing her temper at Lawrence because he was her outlet. She had a lot of things to be upset about, including the end of their trip, and she wanted to vent. She just wanted to blame him again.

“You are so selfish it is stunning.”

He couldn’t turn away. He had to let her do it. He didn’t like being on the receiving end like this, but he was willing to do so in order to avoid an even worse fate. If he wanted to sugarcoat it, he could say it was just the way merchants were, but he knew just how cowardly it really was.

“Especially when you think about me.”

Holo’s face was swelling up as she got angrier and angrier. She’d finally grabbed his ear in rage. His back was bent down even more than it had been all this time. But he couldn’t take this forever, and his mind was already fishing for a counter attack.

“You’re no better.”

“What?”

Lawrence didn’t plan on going this far, but the time had come. He pulled an envelope out from under his jacket. It was the other one that Hugh had sent them from Gerube.

“I wasn’t planning on showing you this.”

He pulled the letter out of its envelope and held it up for her. It was filled with numerous, skilfully-written words, so small that it was hard to imagine that Hugh was the one who had written them. Even the first sentence would spell it out for her.

*This is the story of the travels that we, a non-human and her arguably-human companion, shared as we did business in the cities..*

“If you’re *really* confused, then just read this.”

What he really wanted to say was, “don’t you *dare* pretend you’re confused,” but he just couldn’t bring himself to say it when he saw crystal-like tears spilling from the eyes of the girl still clutching his earlobe.

Time stood still, and even sound itself vanished for a while. But when she finally looked back up into his eyes, he realized her tears were ones of happiness.

“This is exactly what I am talking about..”

Her fangs poked out like she was trying to put on her trademark smirk.

“I wasn’t planning on saying this, either..”

She pulled his ear down to her mouth.

“But you are just so stupid that I must spell it out.. I love you so much..”

In an instant, things like Kinisen, Yoitsu, Myuri, or Cole were completely insignificant. Lawrence didn’t need to worry about what God thought anymore. He’d given Holo a blank check with his signature on it just to hear those words from her one day.

“..honestly.. I have seen so many couples over the years in those wheat fields.. and even in a farming village full of dullards I have never seen any quite as dull as you..”

Lawrence didn’t need to hear any more. All he wanted to do was to hug her, slouching or not. She could even have his earlobe if she wanted it that badly. She flinched at first, but then rested her head on his shoulder and sighed.

“Well, then, since you insist on going with me, let us hand Cole over to that meat bun and get it over with..”

She gently smacked his back with her hands.

“We should really get back to the shop for lunch..”

She kept talking, wanting to leave, but that only made him hold her tighter.

“Hey.. you..”

She was smiling, but she was also trying to push him away. Maybe she didn’t want to dirty herself after just having a bath? But after a bath, every little move she made smelled like a spring breeze to him. This was her pure scent. It was wonderful. He couldn’t help but kiss her neck.

“Hey.. stop playing..”

She was getting more violent, but he wasn’t going to let her go. Not in this alley, free of the hustle and bustle of the city. Not here, where the church steeple wasn’t looming over them. Not even God’s eyes were spying on the two of them now..

“What.. are you..”

He wasn’t going to let her get away this time. She couldn’t push him away if he held her more tightly. He just had to press her up against the wall..

“Not.. in public..”

With something behind her to push off of, she struggled even more.

“You.. foo-”

Lawrence didn’t even hear the rest.

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No eyes were on them as they walked back to Flynn’s, but he still heard people laughing. Oh well, they were probably just merrily laughing with others over lunch. Such rationalization became impossible, however, when they finally stepped into the courtyard in Flynn’s place.

Cole and Elsa noticed it first, then Flynn gasped. Finally, Lou sprayed beer everywhere with his mouth. Holo didn’t care at all. She just held his hand and continued smiling. It took a while before even Flynn opened his mouth this time.

“Oh my.. it looks like we’ll need more eels.”

He darted back into the shop.

“I’ll help you..”

Lou darted in after him. With the other adults now gone, Cole desperately tried talking to Lawrence, but Elsa dragged him into the shop as well. Lawrence and Holo were alone again.

“What *are* they playing at?”

Holo grinned even wider as she joked. Lawrence said nothing, but it wasn’t because he was sulking... his jaw hurt too much to even try talking.

“Oh? ‘Twould seem that our eels are ready.”

A bit of smoke rose from the stove; a sure sign that the oil-glazed eels were over-cooking. Holo brought one back to him on a plate. She then skilfully carved it with a knife. Finally, and inevitably, she lifted it up to his mouth. He really didn't want to deal with this right now..

“Come now.. say ah~”

He scowled and kept his jaw shut. It wasn't out of embarrassment. He just wanted to make it clear how much pain he was in.

“Oh, you do not want any?”

Just the response he expected. He grudgingly opened his mouth and sure enough, a sharp pain hit him. It was actually enough to make him double over. Holo's smile didn't leave her face, though. She patiently waited for him to work past the pain.

At least the eel was delicious, even the bit that had been burned already. It was as bitter as he was, after all. He knew she was stuffing her face delightedly as he fought to chew his first mouthful, but he was looking up into the sky so he wouldn't have to see that.

There was that damned steeple again. It was like he just couldn't avoid it's gaze. It felt like God Himself was sitting on it, arms crossed, looking down on Lawrence.

