



*Drunken Wolf
Translations*

Volume 15

狼 と 香 辛 料

Spice and Wolf

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matty543
hunterg
JayTD
gshegosh
DuckEgg
fluxy

Wolf Divinty
midna25
Pharaohs
inferno09
Bourei
damamm
zeit
Shanhaevel
pt87
compboylt
L1R1_24
redemption024
pocketr2004
Cryophoenix
Shinji117

Fennir
dolcetriade024
anarchy
Blues
shindrgrn
bobm3
John5p
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Refluxive
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支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Meretani
meat
spicy wolf

狼と香辛料

XV 太陽の金貨〈上〉

狼と香辛料



太陽の金貨〈上〉

支倉凍砂

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Illustration

文倉十

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"Answer me."

Lawrence wasn't even sure who had spoken at first.

Myuri Ruward, leader of the Myuri Mercenary Band

It was Holo. Myuri drew his sword like a flash of lightning.

"This is how I answer questions."



Moid Markus, Staff Sergeant of the Myuri Mercenary Band

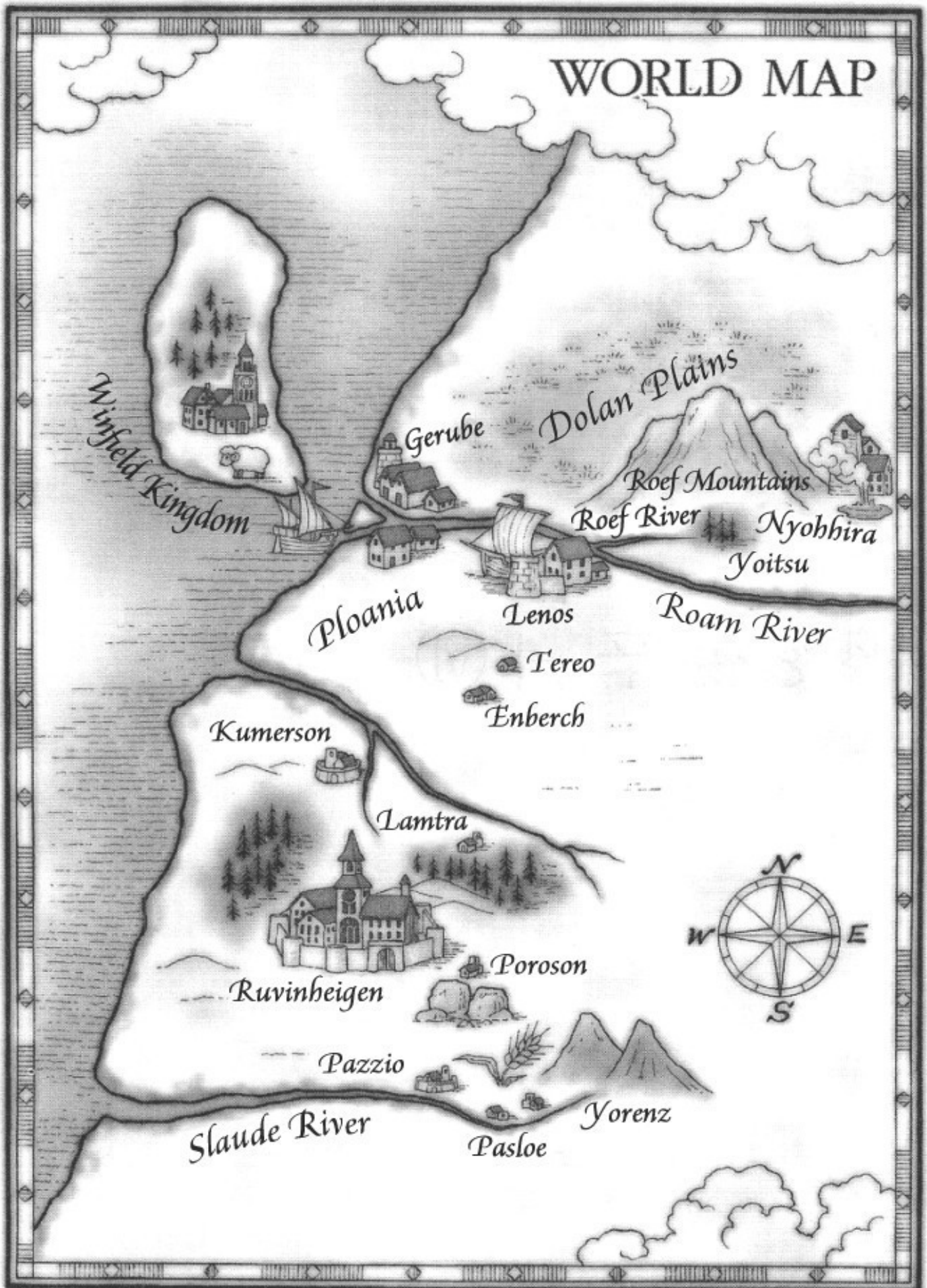
*"I feel that opening a shop here would be the best choice
you could make for yourself"*



“Well, I should probably listen to you once in a while, yes?”

Holo took one of the raisins on top of the desk and gently pressed it into his mouth.

“After all, you are fighting so hard to stay in control.”



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

狼と香辛料 ㊥
太陽の金貨〈上〉

Spice and Wolf

Volume 15

Solar Gold Coin I

*Translation & Editing by
'Drunken Wolf Translations'*

Contents

— Prologue —	4
— Chapter 1 —	7
— Chapter 2 —	30
— Chapter 3 —	58
— Chapter 4 —	93
— Chapter 5 —	123



序 幕



Prologue

Goodbyes are simple things, at least as far as Lawrence saw it. No matter how upsetting a parting was, it was just another event in life. Much like removing an arrow from one's body. Hesitating due to a fear of pain would be even more dangerous. One had to do it quickly, in one move, for the pain to subside as quickly as possible.

But being a human meant that even though you know this wisdom, you won't always be able to apply it. Merchants who traveled more than they lingered around all knew this fact. They were always the ones who were sent away.

Yet, when they had seen Cole and his group off with their eyes, watching them as they kept turning to look back at them, Lawrence realized that he'd simply never had much experience being the one sending someone else off, rather than the other way around.

Holo kept waving her hands at Cole, with a face she had never shown Lawrence before. She smiled with a look of happy closure; it was the same expression he remembered seeing on the faces of those who'd sent him off in the past. Holo eventually stopped waving and hummed in relief, then stretched.

"So, shall we go for a drink?"

She spoke casually, in the same manner she used when she was upset with Lawrence or felt lonely. It was the right decision for Cole to go with Lou Loah and Elsa; Holo knew that in advance and was prepared for it.

Lawrence was supposed to be the one to tell Cole how to write them letters and get in touch with them if he ran into trouble, but Holo ended up beating him to it. She also carefully bought the boy boots, to replace his ratty old shoes. She evaluated the quality of each pair with a wolf's keen senses and enthusiasm that surprised even the cobbler.

She even slept with him one last time, holding him in her arms. Her body was warmer, like a child's, and that wasn't even counting her tail. He was probably far too hot, given how sweaty he was in the morning. Knowing him, he probably even had nightmares that she would eat him.

They all met by coincidence, and parted ways by coincidence. In the end, Cole was just a temporary party member. Of course he had more ambition than seemed reasonable for his size, so he was the type adults would gleefully laugh at with cheer.

Lawrence knew that the lad had only joined them to confirm whether his hometown was safe, and with the hopes that they would help if it was not. But Lawrence also knew, as a traveler, that Cole had to keep moving forward to his own goals.

That lesson was one of the few that Lawrence could proudly say he'd learned on his own. He was so used to being alone on his trading routes that he even got over that rare illusory feeling that one gets that they're the only ones on the entire planet. He knew better, of course, having experienced just how impressively big the world really is.

That's why moving forward to one's goals was so important. Everyone had to follow their own paths from time to time, or risk missing their own opportunities in this vast world. You could only find so many reasons to remain with a person instead of parting with them.

Of course, Lawrence had just such a reason to not part ways with Holo: he made it his goal to keep traveling with her. Even if he knew that would come to an end some day.

序 幕



Chapter 1

It might be cold and dry outside, but at least the sun was warm. In other words, this was great weather for curling up under a blanket, especially with the sounds of a moving wagon to be your lullaby. Lawrence, however, could only sigh at his situation. He wasn't in the mood to nap under a blanket right now.

His deer-skin gloves were nice and toasty, and the wool blanket on his lap was thick, but light. Even his horse, happily fed, was merrily wagging its tail as it trod this wonderfully flat road. It put him in the perfect mood for traveling, no matter how hard he wished otherwise. To top it all off, he wasn't on his own.

Far behind them in the south was Pasloe village, where he had one day met his companion. They worshiped her as a goddess of the harvest for many centuries. She was actually a giant wolf who could swallow a man whole, though lately she chose to remain in her present human form.

Her human form was that of a teenage maiden, and a pretty one at that. And where were her aristocratic-looking brown locks of hair, and soft and frail-looking body right now? They were under the blanket in the back of the wagon, where this girl-like creature named Holo was busily snoring away.

Of course she would never let him call it "snoring." It had to be "breathing." But ever since their time in Lenos, that "breathing" was weighing more and more heavily on his mind. He had to part ways with her when they got to Yoitsu, after all, no matter how much he struggled to prevent that parting.

He'd heard of a book about efficient mining techniques, which was apparently banned because the techniques it spoke of were forbidden. Mining, of course, meant digging minerals out of the ground. It took explosives and clear-cutting, not to mention massively polluting rivers, to make it efficient.

All that was left after mining was a barren and lifeless land. Holo's homeland of Yoitsu was a forest, so this truly concerned her. It would undoubtedly be a nightmare for her if a mining company should ruin that land, especially with banned mining techniques.

That's why they were now working with Lou Loah, a book merchant, and heading to a city named Lesco on the upper tributaries of the Roef River. The best mines in that area were owned by the Diva company, the world's most successful mining firm, and Diva was planning on starting a larger-scale mining operation in the north.

Lawrence was a traveling merchant. After meeting Holo he had been involved in trades

involving thousands and tens of thousands of Trenni silver coins. He knew first-hand just how horribly insignificant a single life was in the face of such money.

Regardless, they were still heading to Lesco now. A band of mercenaries named after an old friend of Holo's was there. Lawrence still remembered Holo crying his name in her sleep when they had just met. So even though they had a map to Yoitsu, and Holo wanted to go there right away, they had to chase after the mercenaries while they were still in a known location.

As a result, Lawrence now had to worry about mercenaries in addition to the reputedly powerful Diva company. He couldn't help but be worried about the details. If they somehow missed them this time, it might be centuries before Holo would find them again (as she'd learned firsthand in Pasloe).

The two of them had traveled through danger before, but this time Lawrence was really nervous as they traveled to Lesco. It might be because Cole wasn't with them anymore, and so Holo had been strangely silent since their last night at the inn. He wanted to do something, but didn't know what he could do. She might just be being quiet, but that seemed unlikely.

"Achoo!"

He soon heard her moaning after her sudden sneeze. She'd never miss even the softest sound while she slept, and could sense threats like a battle-hardened soldier.. but other than that, she was like a little puppy. He heard her rub her face and roll around under the blanket, and possibly stretch. She wouldn't move around like that unless she wanted to get up. Sure enough, her head soon popped out.

"Water.."

Like a loyal servant, he stared at that sleepy-eyed princess as he handed her some water.

"Ugh.. everything *still* looks the same out here.."

She said that like it was a hard trip, but the only real problem they faced this time was that Lesco was at the foot of the northern mountains; it would probably snow as they arrived. But even that wouldn't be much of a hassle, since it hadn't snowed much this winter.

"Mmrnmhrm."

He intentionally mumbled out a vague noise, having absolutely no desire to be more articulate. He got no response other than the bottle being pulled away. He could tell she was looking around, and when he finally looked at her he saw a vaguely angry look on her face.



He'd been trying to figure out what she was thinking for a while now. Was she actually angry? He had no idea. All he could remember was being punched in the face in Lenos. He would have been ashamed, had they not been alone in an alley at the time. She was just too important to him; he didn't want to leave her side for a second. And he knew she felt the same way about him.

True, he was sometimes a little over-confident.. conceited even. But he would be happy just to get any explanation. As a merchant he knew better than to think she would be honest with a reply, but her happiness made him wary. He just couldn't accept it as the truth. If they loved each other, why was it so hard for her to accept it?

She told him she was happy to live as a human, and she seemed to be telling the truth with that much at least.. so why had she rejected him? She seemed so happy after punching him that it scared him. He just couldn't figure it out. And mere moments later, she was already behind her usual mask.

He heard her sigh, and wondered just what he was supposed to do.

"How long before we get there?"

He was so out of it he nearly didn't reply.

"Uh? Um, well, about six days."

There weren't any villages or towns on the way, and in her human form Holo's stamina was human-like. It was a pretty long trip for her, and she was always a pain at times like this. She always sighed right from the start of a trip, but she was now in her impatient and moody phase. Lawrence was quite accustomed to it.

"Is it lively there?"

That was the most important factor for her. A rich and lively city meant good food. A humble village meant food as poor as what they had to eat while on the road. But this time, they were heading to a city controlled by the Diva company. People walked on eggshells when talking about Diva, so even though he had tried his best to investigate the city, he failed. Not many people went to Lesco to begin with, so he was practically doomed from the start.

Flynn dealt with mercenaries, so he knew where Lesco was, but not their situation. In the end all Lawrence could learn was that they were "prosperous." He had to talk to sailors to get that much, and of course they were too busy loading cargo onto ships to give him much more than the time of day. None of the merchants in town seemed to even know what to trade with Lesco.

It was likely that Diva monopolized all the business for their necessities in the north. Since they

dealt in precious minerals, no regular merchant could really deal with them. They could do no business with Lesco, and it took a week to get there by wagon. That was simply too much trouble for a regular person to concern themselves with.

That all being said, people only seemed to think highly of Lesco. They praised it like some sort of rich and powerful king. And they had to be, to occupy such north faring lands and to be able to compete for the bones of ancient creatures related to Holo. Given all of that, it made sense no one would know what was going on in Lesco.

“I heard that it’s lively, but then it’s quite far up north.”

He had a habit of replying in safely vague ways, which Holo didn’t like one bit. Her eyebrows scrunched up and she put on a puzzled expression.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Lesco’s even north of the Ploanian border-”

He stopped, realizing that wasn’t going to be good enough. Instead, he pulled out a pouch he kept behind him.

“You remember these, yes?”

It was a small pouch with fourteen coins in it that Holo liked to play with at inns to waste time.

“All moneychangers keep stock of these coins, but there are so many nations in the north that you’d never be able to carry enough of any one of them to be of use to you.”

He pulled out a Trenni silver coin, which was accepted in most cities.

“Because there are so many coins, people only take the ones they know. And since it takes so much effort to exchange them, no one will do business in the wrong currency. That means fewer merchants will go there, which means fewer guests, which might mean less entertainment. There are so many currencies it’s a huge problem; I don’t even know all of them, let alone which places take which kinds. It’s a real mess for everyone. Would you do business in such conditions?”

Holo nodded in acceptance of his explanation. He was quite sure of his knowledge, and it was too boring to spend much time talking about money-matters anyhow. This ought to be good enough.

“I see. Of course traders would prefer less trouble.”

She spoke in a monotone voice as she popped back under the blankets. He could tell she was implying a double meaning, but that she didn’t really want to talk about it. He just turned his

eyes back to the road and unconsciously touched the cheek she had beaten (on several occasions now).

Ever since they left Lenos he'd felt more distance between them. They were talking again, but things still hadn't improved even after four days. He was also far too exhausted by the trip to keep track of the details anymore.

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That evening (their fourth since leaving Lenos), Holo unconsciously looked Lawrence in the eyes and sighed. It seemed that even she was getting tired of the situation; of waiting for Lawrence to say something so she could twist it every which way. The Wisewolf was showing her wisdom again.

They were still tense during their meal, but at least she asked for seconds - a rarer event than usual these past four days. Lawrence piled a huge helping into her bowl. Her face may have showed no reaction, but her ears twitched. It still wasn't enough, so he started their usual trivial and inconsequential chatting.

When the mood had improved, she finally threw out a topic of her own, though Lawrence responded meekly, not even wanting to startle the rabbits around them.

"You want to talk.. about the Myuri mercenary band?"

"..Mhm."

She stirred the pot and stared at their campfire. Clearly she had wanted to ask about them for a while, but couldn't bring herself to do so in that stifling atmosphere. Lawrence cleared his throat and did his best to answer her as if everything was normal.

"I have nothing new to add.."

She nodded, but said nothing.

"All I know is that they have close to forty members, which makes them a pretty small band. That, and Delink company says they camp near Yoitsu, have a rather young leader, and have a howling wolf as their banner."

"Mhm."

She nodded again, lost in thought. Lawrence chewed on the chicken in his soup. The name of her old friend meant something more to Holo than just some legend from the past. It was a flesh and blood person she knew and touched. She wasn't looking forward to finding the mercenaries.. she was worried.

He could only hope she had been in such a strange mood because of this fact, instead of what had happened between the two of them. He would dearly love to tell her more, but he couldn't tell her what he didn't know. In the end he felt just as responsible for her mood as before, while they silently nibbled at their food.

“Oh, that's right..”

“Hmm?”

Holo raised her eyes from her bowl in anticipation.

“I was also told that their leader is quite brave.”

If it was someone named after her friend, she probably wanted to know about that person. Ultimately it was still just a human's praise of another human, so while Holo smiled as though comforted, it looked more like she was forcing the smile. Lawrence quickly continued.

“But apparently, I'm more handsome.”

He intentionally stroked his beard with pride. He wasn't lying, it was how Mr. Elingin, the master of Delink company, had apprised him. Holo's stopped eating and looked up at him again, as if at a loss for how to respond to someone so stupid. But she couldn't hide how happy her ears and tail reacted, so she looked away from him again. She knew he was intentionally joking, so after thinking it over she finally sighed, scratched her face, and smiled in defeat.

“Is that so? I do remember Myuri being rather ordinary-looking, so that eases my mind.”

“Excellent.”

They were talking, but it was such a forced and awkward conversation. This wasn't good. Lawrence kept forcing a smile, but he was incredibly anxious. Holo spoke up.

“Were you wondering which of you I would choose, if we had just met?”

Good, she was playing along. He quickly replied.

“Perhaps.”

“Neither of you. I would choose Cole.”

She then began slurping up her soup, but stopped midway to continue.

“Oh, but, you remember that boy who wanted to marry me, do you not?”

“..Amati..?”

“Yes. Back then, I chose you.”

It sounded like she was joking around, and he couldn't tell where she was going with this, but he hoped she was talking from the heart. After all, his looks had never been favorably evaluated. Frankly, he was just a poor peddler, and a borderline swindler. He always felt touched when someone traded with him honestly, and trusted him. He always reciprocated when someone did that. So hearing Holo now made him happy, and feel like he was in the middle of one of those trades.

“Well, I will have to see his face before I can really make my choice.”

She smiled at him as though it was hopeless.

“In other words, all I have is my looks, huh?”

She smiled like an angel when she heard that. Both of them knew she didn't really mean it, and was just playing along. He still sighed at her cunning, but on the inside he was just happy to see the usual Holo again. It felt like such a long time since she was herself. He had to keep it going.

“Well, if the Wisewolf says so, it must be true.”

She seemed stunned for a moment, but then grinned in delight.

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“I wonder if we shall find them in Lesco?”

Holo was murmuring as she washed her bowl and spoon in the river. Maybe she'd been staring at the fire too long, and couldn't see that the river was flowing in front of her. Time was always like that too, and wisdom meant putting up a bridge to make it easier to cross.

“Even if we don't, it'll be fun to keep up the hunt.”

Lawrence knew he had to get back to business as soon as possible, and that his time was short. The truth was that if they missed Myuri in Lesco or on their way back to Yoitsu, it was practically impossible for them to keep up the hunt. Holo also knew that, but hearing him say that still made her happy. Her head shifted as she poked at a stone in the fire, and he saw her smile.

“Indeed. The more fun, the better.”

“Well I wouldn't worry about it. We'll find them.”

Holo was the Wisewolf, so she knew better. Being comforted like this didn't really suit her. Her

smile was quickly replaced by a wistful one, as though she regretted tarnishing her image in this way. She began poking the large stones they left in the fire to provide warmth for them at night.

“So when I storm off in anger, will you have fun hunting for me?”

She scraped the ashes off the stones and wrapped them in three layers of cloth. It was cotton, so she carefully handled it and tied it. Watching her made Lawrence feel like it was a noose being tied around his neck. But he wasn't in any position to pretend she hadn't asked that question.

“It'd be fun, but probably not that hard. You'd be crying in hunger most of the time.”

Her ears flipped up, but it wasn't the kind of joke that would make her angry. Instead she laughed menacingly, as if to darken the night sky around them.

The two of them then lay down in the wagon, with the stones warming their bellies and their backs pressed against one another. All they could hear was each other's breathing, until they became so groggy they couldn't tell whose breath was whose anymore and finally fell asleep. In three days, they would arrive in Lesco. Soon after that, they would be in Yoitsu. But at least they could sleep tonight without any worries.

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The plains were coated in a thin layer of snow. They saw more and more footprints as they approached Lesco. Finally they began to see other travelers as well. Most people wore thick fur coats, their faces were all dark as if dusty or burned by the snow.

It didn't look like they were city-dwellers, but rather the cargo haulers necessary for daily life up north. However that didn't mean there weren't any regular merchants. In fact there was a convoy that seemed fairly well-to-do. They weren't using wagons or closed carriages, just mules, implying that they probably took some dangerous paths.

They had heard that it wasn't just mercenaries in Lesco, and they even had a governor who visited them regularly. Still, Lawrence was rather surprised that the atmosphere was not as hostile as he expected. The road was firm and well-kept, clearly not hastily built for some war. Lawrence expected he'd have to rely on Holo's keen senses, but things seemed quite stable in the end.

It was actually a lively atmosphere just under the surface. It felt more like a road people took to earn money, which stirred his merchant's heart. All this for some remote northern town? Was Lesco really that important?

“I don't know why, but everyone seems pretty energetic.”

In contrast, Holo looked like she was half-asleep. She hadn't slept much on the trip, presumably because she was anxious about meeting Myuri. She spoke softly in response.

"Tis quite the opposite of what we expected."

They presumed that since the Diva company, owner of mines, occupied the north, that other merchants wouldn't dare come here and risk war. In reality, there were a lot of merchants on the road.

"Well, at any rate, we'll see why when we get there."

There was nothing else they could do, so Lawrence just gripped the reins and let his horse gallop freely. The worried Holo could only nod. She was so terribly anxious about meeting the friend she hadn't seen in centuries that all Lawrence could do for her was keep himself in a good mood so it would lift hers.

He had been debating how to do just that. Perhaps a tall tale or two to distract her? Everything he came up with seemed far too deliberate, and in the end he was unsure whether he could even act naturally enough to pull it off. All he knew was business, after all. He was just a dull peasant with little wit when it came to conversation.

In the end he decided that all he all he could was take action, rather than clumsily blurt something out. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself and took her gloved hand in his. He held it tightly to indicate that she didn't have to worry on her own. As expected, she was stunned. She stared at him, then their joined hands.

Lawrence had braced himself for a beating and was staring ahead, prepared to die. But she didn't make a move. It felt like time itself was freezing, but when she finally looked up at him again it was with a gentle and helpless smile. She seemed to be laughing at herself for being so anxious that she made him worry. But she didn't let go of his hand.

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They were now closer than ever to the Diva company, the mining firm. Even Keeman, the manager of the Rowen Trade Guild branch of Gerube, warned them to stay away from here. Lesco was at the end of the road they had taken. And now, smack dab in the middle of that road and shocked, was Lawrence.

He wasn't exactly darting his eyes back and forth like a curious child, but he was looking around a lot more than he usually did. Why wasn't there a wall around town? He barely even noticed that they were actually in the middle of Lesco. He suspected it was built at the foot of the mountains like a mining town would be, a place where people worked to make their fortunes. But it seemed he was wrong yet again.

Despite being near the mountains, Lesco was nothing like a mining town. It wasn't a depressing and miserable place, and it was far from small. In fact it was spread out quite impressively. There were many nice buildings, and they had even paved the roads with stones despite the ground being far from rocky.

It seemed this was simply done to make an impression so people would hear travelers walking through town. It would have taken several years to pave these roads, not to mention being expensive to maintain. How could they afford such a thing if they didn't even have a wall to help them tax the populace? Was it simply because the businesses along the road pitched in?

Even the side roads were beautiful, despite being less crowded. Far from being a tense place where war might break out at any moment, everyone seemed enthusiastic. It looked like they had beaten the odds magnificently.

"Hey, are you sure this is the right place?"

Holo was just as surprised as he was. Everything they'd heard pointed to a place the northern landowners were making a mess of with a lot of terrible mining operations. What was going on here? The shops were full of goods and customers, and musicians and poets were performing everywhere. All kinds of people were here.

Of course there were seedier types as well, but they weren't walking around with spears; they were playing cards in the pubs that were open this time of day. Even priests could be seen here and there talking, looking well-dressed instead of hard-pressed to spread their faith. What was this? Lawrence stopped their wagon off to the side for a moment to recover.

"Why is everyone so happy here?"

Holo was muttering to herself.

"Now I look like a fool after being so nervous."

Lawrence wouldn't agree with her, of course, but it was the truth. Were they just seeing the pleasant surface of a place that was rotten at the core?

"What will we do now?"

Lawrence snapped out of it when he heard Holo ask her question.

"Well we can't just sit around wasting time, so let's just do what we came here to do."

It might have been his sudden enthusiasm, but Holo's eyes opened roundly in surprise. She smiled and nodded. The Delink company and Flynn had given them a letter having dealt with mercenaries regularly, so Lawrence pulled it out and checked which inn they were supposed to

head to.

According to Delink, Myuri's mercenary band stayed at a particular inn to avoid being attacked by other bands or armies. Only their trading partners knew which one it was, and if they wanted to keep doing business they wouldn't betray it to just anyone. After all, mercenaries were much worse as enemies than as political or financial allies.

Not to mention that slave traders like Delink would benefit most from good ties with mercenary bands. There was no reason for them to give up such an address unless it was for mutually-beneficial business. Mercenary bands had to make the most of each and every opportunity they came across, and so their leaders were ultimately not that different from merchants.

Lesco was such a large and lively place, with no walls and full of prosperous-looking buildings, that Lawrence had to keep asking for directions to find the right inn. There was a manger outside that was large enough to accommodate groups of mercenaries, and it wasn't just big: it had glass windows that made it possible to see what was inside.

A worker came out when he saw Lawrence approaching, and reached out to take the reins. He did so so casually that it was clear this was just a regular routine around here. Lawrence was so beside himself that he didn't even know if he ought to hand the boy the reins. But he didn't want to add to Holo's concerns, so he quickly composed himself and hopped down, then smacked the side of the wagon.

"I will take good care of it, sir."

The boy wasn't that much older than Cole, but his voice and smile seemed quite slimy. Lawrence could tell from his hair and eye color that he wasn't local, but from somewhere in the south.

Lawrence preferred observing a new town on his first visit, especially when it proved so counter to his expectations.. but right now it was most important to find the Myuri mercenaries. Of course, they might just be using that name coincidentally, perhaps having heard a story about the real Myuri and wishing to coast off his legend.

Still, mercenaries and normal merchants were natural enemies. Even Flynn, a grocer who always dealt with mercenaries, was wary of them. Lawrence took a deep breath to calm himself, and noticed that Holo had her right hand pressed against her chest.

"Shall we?"

He couldn't help but ask, seeing how stiffly Holo was acting.

"After you."

Fair enough. If they were just going to be thrown out, he might as well go first. He triple-checked the letter and his own appearance, then gently pushed the door. A bell rang as it opened, and it seemed that the first floor was a bar with many round tables and three people inside. Their sleeves weren't rolled up, and they didn't have scars on their faces, so it wasn't clear whether they were mercenaries.

None of the three stared at Lawrence, though one of them quickly glanced at him before returning his attention to their conversation. There was another man standing around who looked like a merchant.

“Can I help you?”

He seemed as young and normal as Lawrence, except for his muscular arms. He might very well be a battle field supplier. He eyed Lawrence as though evaluating a competitor.

“I was told that the Myuri mercenary band are here.”

The moment he mentioned their name, everyone turned around. They stopped chatting and playing around for a bit, but soon resumed. Holo's head was cast downward as though her nerves had failed her.

“Makes sense.. I take it you're here to sell something?”

He was looking at Holo, obviously wondering why Lawrence brought a girl like her to a den of mercenaries.

“Actually.. no, the Delink company of Lenos asked me to speak with them.”

He took the letter out of his pocket just long enough to display the red seal on it. It was a gesture meant to make it clear that he was supposed to speak with someone in charge. The corner of the man's mouth rose up, and everyone's eyes were on Lawrence the moment he mentioned Delink company.

“Is the captain here?”

The man stared at Lawrence before turning to ask someone. He heard a voice reply that the staff sergeant was on the second floor. The man's head was turned away, but his eyes turned back to Lawrence.

“Doesn't seem like the captain's in, but you can go see the staff sergeant.”

The rule was that an organization like this had specific people to deal with outsiders. It was obvious that Lawrence would be coming to talk to the captain, but wasn't going to be given that honor. He hesitated, but knew that if he acted tough now Holo might miss her chance to learn

about how the group related to her friend. This was the only way he could do that much, so he nodded.

“This way please.”

The young man nodded and turned, but at that moment everyone looked up.

“Uh..”

Lawrence wasn't sure if it was the man who made that noise, but his mouth did move. Just before Lawrence's eyes turned to follow everyone's stares, they all rose to their feet. The bell was ringing again, and Lawrence saw the young man stand up straight and put on the same expression as the others. He turned around and saw another young man, somewhere between teenagehood and adolescence, who was quite short and had trimmed hair and sharp eyes.

“Hmm? What happened?”

His voice was a bit hoarse, as though he needed to clear his throat. His clothes were the same as the others, but seemed to indicate a higher rank. In a way, he looked a bit more like a nobleman than a mercenary with his fur coat almost touching the ground like a cape.

“Oh, a merchant? And what.. a nun?”

He smiled like a wild animal, in a dangerous-looking yet charming manner. He held Holo's chin and raised her face. It seemed he was used to acting that way. It made Lawrence harden himself and become a merchant again.

“We've come to meet the captain of the Myuri mercenary band.”

Lawrence bowed and put on an incredible smile. If weapons were what mercenaries fought with, then such smiles and letters of introduction were what merchants fought with.

“Oh, really.. what's this? Delink company?”

Holo's chin was still in his hand, but when he saw the seal on the letter he realized he was acting improperly. He nervously pulled his hand away and suddenly turned into an innocent-looking boy.

“Ah, pardon me. I thought you came to sell her. But indeed her face is too lovely to be a prostitute.”

His manner was rude, but his smile seemed genuine. It felt like an attempt to make up for his rudeness, like a man unused to being in finer company. He seemed a bit suspicious of Holo's lack of a reaction, but that smile indicated that he was as accustomed to mental wars as he was physical ones. He turned to face Lawrence.

“Well then. I am Myuri Ruward of the Myuri Mercenaries.”

He removed his coat as he reported his name, and with his hand against his hip like that he looked like a proper mercenary again. He stood with a prestigious pose, but Lawrence sensed that he was only as old as he appeared to be. Holo seemed to have noticed the same thing; the Myuri in front of her was really just a human. Otherwise he would have reacted differently to Holo.



All of a sudden, however, they heard the sound of water drops hitting the floor. Myuri raised his palm up to the roof, wondering if the ceiling was leaking, but Lawrence immediately looked at Holo's face. She still wore her poker face, but had been unable to hold back her tears.

"That.. claw.."

She ignored all the eyes upon her and simply spoke those words. Lawrence followed her eyes to Myuri's chest, and realized that the black object there wasn't an ox's horn. He had thought it was just some token of a mercenary's courage, or a charm to pray for victory, but Holo's reaction was completely different and Myuri's expression quickly melted into one of surprise.

"You know this is a claw?"

Holo nodded, and immediately began sobbing. They were the tears of a young maiden, but they weren't tears of happiness. Lawrence instantly moved between them and held her in his arms, but when he opened his mouth to explain things, Myuri stopped him.

"Come with me."

He tossed those words out and pushed the puzzled young man aside to lead Lawrence and Holo upstairs. But Lawrence and Holo remained still, so Myuri turned back on the stairs and continued.

"There's something you need to know."

They felt out of place, but had no way to deny him. The top brass in these organizations were normally like the leaders of noble families; they were the elders who had survived several generations. But the Myuri mercenary band was different. Their staff sergeant was a man with impressive silvery spikes of hair. His beard was equally impressive.

"You want me to leave too?"

He was planning to report something to Myuri, who had just returned. And yet, he was surprisingly being ordered away by Myuri like some low-ranking petty officer.

"Yes. No one else is authorized to be on this floor right now. Take the others with you."

Myuri's tone made it clear he wasn't to be questioned. It was proud, but spirited, and reminded Lawrence of the stories of mercenary bands who ended up dead because they couldn't respect their leader's orders. The sergeant seemed upset, but contrary to his facial expression he immediately stood up straight.

"Aye sir!"

He then left the room and loudly order the others to go downstairs.

The room they were in was full of trinkets, making it clear that this was indeed a proper base for the band. Most of the items were equipment for traveling, but some were tokens for dealing with different noble rulers. Books and scrolls were everywhere and, even more surprising, several novels about knights. Lawrence never expected that a mercenary would read something like that. Myuri seemed to notice and sat down laughing.

“Well, it’s not like we can drink before a fight. I need to know something heroic to inspire my men. That’s all I can do if I can’t get ’em drunk.”

It clearly was the leader of the band sitting in front of them.

“Alright, let’s get this over with.”

A good leader needs to trust his subordinates. Myuri slowly rose back to his feet and looked out the partially-opened window. He seemed nervous.. was he worried his men were listening? It was cold, but he couldn’t just close the shutters. It was so tense in the room that it felt like they’d all pass out before even getting to the truth. Lawrence gripped Holo’s hand tightly, but he was actually doing it less to encourage Holo and more to help himself relax.

“How do you know this is a claw?”

He held the object on his chest and asked Holo directly. Given its size and shape, it was obviously cut from something larger. It made for a clumsy decoration, being almost as long as Lawrence’s open hand. No one with a high rank would want to wear something so old-fashioned these days; everyone wanted something smaller and more expensive-looking.

“From the smell.”

She replied just as directly. Myuri stared at her and nodded.

“And you don’t seem to be a wealthy merchant. Forgive me, but it’s strange that you have connections with Delink, not to mention that famous grocer even wrote this letter for you. Who are you?”

Lawrence had expected that question, of course, so his expression didn’t change. But he didn’t get the chance to answer.

“Where did you get that?”

He dropped her hand unconsciously, and it took a moment for it to register that he’d even let her go. Holo spoke calmly, and with an icy tone. She was staring at the ground like some pathetic little girl acting tough after being sold into slavery. But it was obvious just how angry she was. If she didn’t hear the right answer, she would never forgive him. But Myuri showed no

fear.

“You mean this claw?”

Sometimes, mercenaries were led by a true noble, who had the money and clout to form a band. But they could also just be simple thieves who had been hired and worked their way up the ranks. Myuri could be either of these. Perhaps he’d succeeded someone, or perhaps he became the natural leader of a band of bandits.

Holo was just a girl, after all, and it was clear that he wasn’t going to let himself be swayed by her obvious anger. Lawrence wondered if he ought to jump in, since Holo sometimes struggled with human communication. She might know better, but if her anger got the best of her, she might end up regretting it later.

“Why do you ask?”

Myuri didn’t lose his temper. He just glared at her sharply. He ignored Lawrence entirely, and just stared this little nun-like girl with a pretty face down with stony eyes.

“Answer me.”

Lawrence wasn’t even sure who had spoken at first, but it was Holo. Myuri drew his sword like a flash of lightning.

“This is how I answer questions.”

Before anyone could have reacted, his sword was pointed at her. But her throat wasn’t slit. Was he just being patient? Lawrence couldn’t tell at first, but it turned out to not be the case.

“Answer me.”

Holo simply repeated herself. The sword quivered for a moment, and Myuri realized his ploy wouldn’t work. The girl who had sobbed downstairs was entirely unafraid of his sword. It was a surreal scene, with Myuri’s obviously real sword pointing at her neck as he held the claw in his other hand and stared at her. His eyes then fell to the ground in defeat.

“Don’t mistake me for some thug who took it by force.”

He lowered his sword as if surrendering, but held the claw up with his other hand. He wasn’t treating Holo like a girl at all. It seemed this mercenary captain knew who she really was under that cloak of hers.

“It was bequeathed to me by my father.”

He continued, taking his time as though giving her a chance to reply.

“And bequeathed to my father by his father before him.”

Holo stared up at him.

“Along with the Myuri name?”

He seemed taken aback, with a mix of rage and surprise in his eyes. Lawrence reflexively intervened, hoping to smooth things over, knowing he was just a third party in this battle.

“Forget about it, I’m not really angry.”

He waved Lawrence’s hand aside, realizing his intent. But his eyes were still glued on Holo, like he was carefully searching his memories. Finally, as though hoping to calm an angry beast, he carefully and respectfully spoke.

“And what’s your name?”

He answered her question with a question of his own. Normally, she would fly into a rage, but not this time. He might not have answered her question, but he was being respectful and not impetuous.

“Holo.”

A frown unconsciously appeared on his face when he heard her curt reply. But what really surprised Lawrence was when his jaw dropped and he knocked his forehead.

“I see!”

He reacted so loudly that the books in the room all trembled. It befit a commander who ordered his men on the battlefield, but Lawrence wasn’t used to such a shout. Holo’s sensitive ears probably felt even worse, but she didn’t even flinch. She was like a rock. It finally sank in that Myuri Ruward was his real name, a name passed down to him by legacy.

“Paro, Kiritz, Yue, Inti, Sharmin.”

Myuri recited several names, all familiar to Holo. Her face distorted and her lips began trembling. Incredibly, Myuri seemed to be holding back tears as well. He spoke as if he’d lost his voice.

“..My father told me those names so many times..”

He finally managed to regain the voice of a leader.

“..And my grandfather even more so.”

He approached Holo and took her small hand in his. She looked up at him and removed her hood. Lawrence was reminded of how jealous he was when he first heard in Lenos that Myuri might still be alive. He was as old as Holo, after all, and had lived with her and been the object of her tears, so Lawrence didn't like him.

But jealousy wasn't going to help anything, and it usually only gave birth to regrets. Like right now. Myuri was stunned for a moment when he saw her ears, but he managed to keep his poise as a mercenary captain. With his other hand, he removed the claw from his neck and placed it tightly in her hand.

“Our founding leader had this.”

It was a legacy of tens of generations, of hundreds of years. The legend behind it might have become thin as threads over time, until it finally became little more than a myth, but it was actually the genuine article. Holo cupped it in both hands and stared at it. Myuri turned it in those hands, revealing the words carved into it. Lawrence was unfamiliar with the ancient runes, but Holo knew them. The moment she saw them, tears began streaming down her face.

“Long time, no see..”

She spoke through her tears and laughed as her shoulders trembled. She laughed, choked, dried her tears, and then cried again. Myuri held her shoulder, and finally looked back at Lawrence for the first time since they began talking. It seemed that even though he was the leader of a band of mercenaries, he was still willing to be a gentleman. It was obvious whose arms she should be crying in right now. Lawrence held her tightly as she wailed.

“To the wolf protecting us: we can finally carry out our promise to you.”

Myuri spoke those words softly. Every story in the world was bound by threads of fate, and now the Myuri mercenary band had come face to face with that fate. Now, they could welcome the end of that story.



序 幕



Chapter 2

In the end, Myuri let them stay in a room at the inn. Lawrence wanted to at least help out by shipping some goods, but Myuri couldn't just accept his hospitality with something so important to the lives of his men. He seemed like a good leader, fit to bear a name as legendary as Myuri's. All Lawrence could do was try to comfort Holo, but..

"I'd like to be alone for a while."

Holo made her request between sobs. He knew she might just be messing with him to make him nervous, but since he wasn't nervous right now he knew she meant it. She had already held him tightly for a long cry, and now she needed to confide in herself. He knew she genuinely needed time to herself, to think things over. So he just quietly dried her tears with his finger and pointed at the water skin on the table.

"As long as you stick to drinking water."

Drinking right now would only make her more miserable, so she put a big dumb grin on her swollen, tearful face.

"Foolish mule."

"I'll stay in the inn, and let you know if I have to leave."

The still-fresh memories of their visit to Lenos made him hesitate, but he still hugged her and stood up. She stared at him until he left the room. He sighed once the door was closed behind him, but not out of compassion. Myuri's sad message to her had been delivered, but his descendants were still alive and his legend lived on.

"Got a minute?"

Myuri had been leaning against the wall at the top of the stairs, just a few steps away from their room. He stood up tall as he spoke, and when Lawrence nodded he descended the stairs after making his request.

"Please join me in my room."

"Sure."

A mercenary captain, someone used to killing and seeing death, not to mention buying and selling slaves, was holding the door open for Lawrence. It was strange that the teenager hired for that job wasn't doing it instead. He seemed a bit confused at being dismissed, and even more surprised to see the captain doing it in his place.

“Don’t be nervous.”

Myuri walked into the room after gently dismissing the teenager, and stretched his hands out to Lawrence in a gesture of goodwill.

“See, I’m still trembling too.”

Mercenaries should never show weakness, so Lawrence took that as a sign of great respect. He realized it was mostly respect for Holo, but even the slightest respect heading his way was relieving.

“I still haven’t asked you your name.”

Myuri let Lawrence take a seat before sitting down himself.

“Lawrence. Kraft Lawrence.”

“Kraft Lawrence.. a fine name. You’re not from a Ploanian guild, are you?”

His manner of speech didn’t match his roughness of appearance. Lawrence knew that if he relaxed even for a moment, he would see right through him.

“No, I’m a member of Rowen.”

Myuri nodded. Mercenaries fought everywhere, so he surely knew more regions than any merchant would.

“Well then. I take it you mean former member, since you surely violated their orders when you came here, yes?”

“Correct. Technically I’m nobody now.”

If anything happened now, no company would come to his aid. Yet Myuri seemed to relax a bit when he heard that. Lawrence was a bit puzzled by that, but the teenager from a moment ago suddenly entered the room carrying a bottle of wine and two rough clay cups on a tray.

“Let’s have a drink. If you’re worried about poison, I don’t mind exchanging cups.”

“Oh, no need. Don’t worry about it.”

It wasn’t really funny, but Lawrence still chuckled. He could tell how restless Myuri was when he took the cup from him. Myuri smiled like he was trying to conceal his embarrassment.

“This really does feel like a predestined meeting.”

Myuri lifted his cup and took a drink. Lawrence did the same. It was great wine. So good that Lawrence stared at it in awe until Myuri seemed pleased.

“It would have been that much better if my father and grandfather were here, though.”

Myuri’s eyes had been tracing around the desk like he was searching for the right words to say. It was a bit odd to hear him ultimately say that when he looked up.

“You know, it’s really tough to accept this. I was fully prepared for this to be some sort of swindle.”

He smiled, but was obviously having a tougher time than he let on. Lawrence wasn’t sure how mildly to react.

“I can’t blame you for thinking that.”

In the end he just spoke his mind. Myuri nodded in agreement, then faked a cough.

“Whenever a battle starts, we fight on the border between the worlds of the living and the dead.”

Lawrence had even less of a clue what to say now. Even back when he didn’t believe in gods, he could swear his deceased traveling companions were walking beside his cart on rainy, moonless nights.

“I didn’t know if it was God or the Reaper, but on several brushes with death I could feel myself being pointed in the right direction to survive. Maybe that’s just something that soldiers feel, and maybe there’s nothing actually there, but I can’t help but feel like something’s helped me out. That’s why-”

He sighed and looked down at the desk, unsure whether he should finish his sentence or not. But after taking a deep breath, he chose to finish it.

“That’s why our flag is like that.”

The red flag up on the wall had a howling wolf on it. It was common for mercenaries to put animals on their flags, and wolves symbolized power and wisdom. Lots of people liked that notion, but it didn’t explain why Myuri showed no fear when he saw Holo’s ears. All Lawrence could imagine was that Myuri had been saved by something inhuman on some occasion.

“I guess you’ve also got a helper like this? Maybe..?”

“Holo?”

Myuri's face scrunched up when he heard Lawrence say her name.

"..Is it alright to call her by name like that?"

He stared at the ceiling as he asked, his tone clearly being serious.

"Oddly enough, she doesn't like being treated like a god."

Myuri raised an eyebrow in puzzlement and let out a short breath. Suddenly he burst out laughing with his hand on his forehead.

"Maybe I do have some of that blood after all.. I've always hated being called 'captain.'"

He might just be joking around to ease the tense atmosphere, but Lawrence wasn't too happy to hear that bit about bloodlines.

"My ancestor was a wolf - lots of my men trust that. But my father and grandfather always plainly denied it. They even got angry when they heard it."

"Angry?"

"Legend has it that my ancestor, our band's founder, met a wolf one day. He helped that wolf, and they helped him, and over time our band was formed. The wolf's name was Myuri."

Lawrence nodded, seeing the truth of it. Myuri kept talking.

"Of course, we got the better part of the bargain, so we've always revered wolves. I mean, we only use fur from foxes, mink, and deer, even if they're that much more expensive."

Myuri shrugged, probably intentionally, having revealed that their group wasn't really that powerful. Lawrence had a hard time believing that, but it seemed to be true.

"Still, we have to use stories like that to recruit members."

He waved his cup and continued.

"In the grand scheme of things, these kinds of stories are the most effective tools we have. They're like soul food, helping people keep their eyes on the future. That's how I see it."

Lawrence's former guild also had a founding legend. All towns and villages did as well. This kind of thing helped distinguish where people were from. It made for a solid foundation where people could gather.

"Yeah.. maybe."

Myuri took another deep breath and showed an exhausted smile when he looked back up at Lawrence. He had been looking at the desk for a while now.

“You know, I’ve heard so many stories about my ancestors, but the most revered ones were always of Holo the Wisewolf. I was always told to show her the message carved on that claw if I ever met her.”

Lawrence stared at the ceiling for a while. He wasn’t about to say something offensive, but he still wanted to tread lightly.

“I met her in a remote village, where she told me she’d lived for centuries. She couldn’t even remember where her home was anymore, but wanted to go back. That’s why I’m sending her back.”

“Sending her back?”

Myuri spoke as if Lawrence had misspoken. After a moment of puzzlement Lawrence saw the forced smile on his face and understood. He’d seen how Holo clung to him while she cried.

“I mean bringing her back.”

He was unable to suppress a smile as he corrected himself.

“That’s what makes life worth living.. you never know who or what you’ll meet tomorrow. Though it does come with never-ending worries.”

He stared at Lawrence with sharp eyes. He’d been friendly, but now it was clear that the time for pleasantries was over. His dream-like demeanor had suddenly returned to cold, hard reality. Lawrence’s entire body was tense as he waited for Myuri’s next question.

“I want the truth. Are you two out to destroy Diva?”

As Lawrence expected of someone in a mercenary band named after Myuri, he was already considering such things after just meeting with Holo. Lawrence had anticipated several questions like this, and had already prepared several possible answers. He’d planned on saying something like “even if I can’t, I’d like to give them a run for their money,” if for no reason other than to match Myuri’s tough attitude. But it seemed that Myuri was genuinely afraid of something.

“No, that’s impossible.”

Myuri didn’t react. Lawrence moistened his dry lips and continued.

“What we’re really worried about is Yoitsu.”

Several seconds of silence followed before the mercenary captain finally nodded.

“Really?”

It was a short reply, followed by a shrug and a deep breath. He stopped breathing for a while, probably trying to sort out his nervousness.

“..huh, really..”

He sighed as he repeated himself, his short hair tumbling around. He seemed tired, like he’d finally completed his task in this conversation. In his heart, it seemed he was afraid that Lawrence was going to say they were out to destroy Diva.

“Of course our trip would be easier if we just find help and destroy Diva company.”

All this time, Holo had concealed her identity, worrying about the Church and even harsh receptions from other ancient spirits in the towns they visited. She realized now just how hard people struggled just to survive these harsh times. She would rather just bare her fangs and move forward, unforgiving of anyone for getting in her way, but that kind of approach just wouldn’t work anymore.

“You see, with our reputation..”

Myuri scratched his head.

“For our flag, we’ll face any battle, no matter how hopeless. We would fight until our last drop of blood was shed.”

He spoke excitedly, almost like he was singing. In fact he might be hoping others would hear him, like the eavesdropping staff officer and teenager. But when he stared at Lawrence, it was clear what he was working towards.

“So if Holo and I were to ask, the Myuri mercenaries band would fight to their last.”

“Correct.”

It seemed they fought for their principles, either out of stubbornness or a desire to defend their honor. Lawrence could see himself partnering with Myuri.

“Holo is very much the same. But life teaches us many things, and we’ve learned a great deal on our journey. Like how hard it is to find old friends.”

Lawrence wasn’t asking anything, but Myuri took a breath when he realized what he was saying. He just shook his head silently. He didn’t know where her old friend was, and the look on his face made that abundantly clear.

“And so.. I only really have one question I want to ask on her behalf.. is Yoitsu still alright?”

Before he met Holo, Yoitsu was just a name he’d heard at some inn. He didn’t know if it still existed. But now he was staring down a stranger in the hopes of getting a serious response. It felt like a dream come true to be with Holo, passing so many obstacles and walking forward with her while holding her hand. These things really did just happen.

“In fact, it’s fine.”

Myuri looked up and repeated himself.

“In fact, it’s fine.”

Maybe he thought Holo was eavesdropping as well.

“Don’t worry, the Wisewolf could hear a whisper miles away. She’s just not in the best of shape right now.”

Myuri smiled, looking younger than he really was. There was no laughter, just a wild grin.

“Then you haven’t been to Yoitsu yet, have you?”

“Right. We’ve got a map to it.. but we felt it would be better to meet the Myuri mercenary band first.”

“Ah, now I see. Everyone has their priorities, I guess. Shame that I’m just named after Myuri. Sorry about that.”

Lawrence nervously wanted to say “don’t worry about it,” but Myuri’s smile made it clear that he was just joking.

“Yoitsu is fine. It’s now a part of the Tolchin region. People don’t usually travel there, since it’s a wild forest.”

Holo’s ears would surely be perked up high right now. She might even be curled up and gripping the bed sheets in delight.

“It’s just that we heard a lot of rumors about the Diva company, all of them bad. That’s why we wanted to ask someone in your position for help.”

“You can call me Myuri.”

The young captain jumped in as Lawrence spoke.

“We just kept hearing about Diva company conquering the north, Diva company opening mines everywhere, Diva company this, Diva company that..”

“I see.”

Myuri nodded and sighed.

“And when you finally arrived here, you saw that it was nothing like that at all. Just a lively city with merchants busily making money.”

Lawrence began talking again after Myuri spoke as if talking to the window.

“Exactly, and-”

“I’d wager everyone would see it that way when they just arrive here.”

The interruption surprised Lawrence, but he didn’t stop Myuri.

“In fact, war is coming, and dangerous trades are going on all the time, according to those in the know. That hated region has finally been conquered. Ever since last autumn, dangerous rumors have been spreading among dangerous people like us. Others began gathering here, whether they believe the rumors or not. And then.. the northern expedition was suddenly cancelled. We all lost our jobs and our goals. We all came here only to end up in this strange situation.”

Mercenaries were always realistic people, so if Myuri said something was strange, it had to be strange.

“Diva’s company is paying for room and board for all these foreign groups.”

“What?!”

Lawrence looked around, regretting his outburst. He eventually calmed down and nodded for Myuri to continue.

“The other mercenaries all feel the same way we do. We’re all nervous. We all think the rumors are true because of this.”

Merchants wouldn’t be willing to make a bad investment like this. They only spent this kind of money if they expected a substantial profit in the end. Even a child would realize they were gearing up for war if they were spending so lavishly. After all, mercenaries were hardly the sort that people wanted to have around all the time.

“It’s been like this for several weeks, some groups have even been here almost a month. Can you believe it? They’re spending twenty Lumione a day to keep foreign soldiers fed. However-”

Myuri took a scroll off the shelf. Lawrence had no idea what it was at first, but it seemed to be a contract of some sort.

“We have an oath we usually swear to employers: by your protection, we shall be your sword and shield, etc etc. It’s the one we usually take in exchange for money so they can have our loyalty. We take the money to enjoy our lives, but we fight as we’ve sworn to fight. Yet they wouldn’t accept it.”

“No?”

Lawrence was confused. Planning too carefully and taking too long was even worse than a quick and reckless plan. You could miss your chance entirely, and waste your investment. Soldiers would grow restless and tired, and all those soldiers would attract an undesirable crowd. You’d end up with lots of soldiers, but no ability to unify them.

Myuri sighed and looked out the window again. Lawrence could tell he was sad because he was just sitting around in such a peaceful place.

“From what I’ve heard, the northern landowners still haven’t made a move. And Diva won’t move until they do. It makes sense. It would be suicide to work without any powerful supporters, and the landowners haven’t been willing to shelter any soldiers just yet. So people say they’re just holding off on making the decision, which checks out given that we’re just sitting around here eating and getting restless. That, and Diva hasn’t even given us any strategic information on troop deployments or anything, so all we have to do around here is wonder what to eat every night.”

His long-winded explanation made it clear just how resentful Myuri was. He was used to a life of fighting with weapons, not sitting around and waiting.

“So you see, all we can really tell you is that Yoitsu is safe *for now*.”

“I see..”

“However.”

Myuri’s eyes closed, probably making sure he chose the best phrasing for what he was about to say. When he finally spoke those words, it was after clearing his throat and carefully controlling his volume.

“Diva company is definitely being wise. Everyone in Lesco right now is from the north. So like you two, all of us here treasure those lands.”

He walked up to a map on one wall as he spoke, clearly a map of the northern lands. It looked

like an extended version of the map Fran had drawn for Lawrence and Holo. At the very least, it was confirmation that her map was accurate in the end, even if this one was better. Myuri pointed at a spot on the map, the spot in Tolchin formerly known as Yoitsu.

“We were thinking of deploying here. Of course, no one would be stupid enough to start a fight on their home soil, especially now that we know Holo the Wisewolf is real.”

He was only half-joking. Myuri did know legends about Holo, so he knew better than to challenge her.

“..so, you mean you were planning on defending it?”

Myuri nodded. He must be seriously expecting the war would extend that far, given that captains of mercenary bands were even more grounded in reality than merchants.

“Yes, to a certain extent. From Tolchin to Sovereign in the northeast, there are several roads used by hunters and miners. Once war breaks out, Sovereign will be important, both geographically and politically. So there is no doubt that there will be hard fighting there. Anyone running from there will pass through Tolchin, and that’s where we’ll catch them.”

“..And sell them to Delink company as slaves.”

Myuri nodded as Lawrence spoke to himself.

“Indeed. Every village is at risk now. We can take more than just wounded soldiers, we can also take fleeing refugees. After all, they’ll just threaten other villages if we don’t. Delink is known for taking care of their merchandise, and even the slaves end up more educated and wealthy when all is said and done, so it all ends up pretty tidy.”

Lawrence had no way of knowing how much truth was behind those words, but at least Myuri was thinking in terms a merchant could appreciate.

“Diva’s company agrees with our ideas.”

“Meaning?”

“People who want to keep their homes safe will be deployed where they can do just that.”

“So everyone will be defending.”

Myuri looked at Lawrence and pouted like a teacher seeing a sharp student miss a point.

“Diva’s is, actually, rather good at mining. They don’t generally destroy everything where they mine.”

“Oh.”

“See, they dig for silver and copper and such, and there are those who want to turn their villages into towns no matter how important the land might be. Diva wisely treats it case by case.. they wait for those poor villages who want help to come to them. That way they won’t be held in much contempt, and can deal with those who complain more smoothly. All these knights and mercenaries are here because they’re serious about things going smoothly.”

Mercenaries were usually used to supplement an army, but Diva was actually hoping to transfer all the people’s hatred onto them. They were being very careful in how they listened to everyone involved. There were people who were forced to become mercenaries out of poverty, and who were worried about whether they would be able to survive on a daily basis. All of them could be deployed strategically according to their wishes, but was it really for their sake? Lawrence doubted it, and Myuri did as well.

“Anyway, it’s still just a rumor. We have time to think it over.”

He clapped his hands to signal the end of their conversation, but as Lawrence reflected on it he realized that most of their chat had been monopolized by Myuri. He wasn’t trying to force his ideas onto Lawrence, but just telling him everything he knew. Was it out of fear of Holo? Lawrence was worried that he’d abused her power again in the end, but at least he didn’t have to feel bad about asking Myuri for his help. He stood and reached his hand out to Myuri.

“Holo will surely thank you as well.”

Myuri took Lawrence’s hand.

“Solving problems feels good, so I’d like to solve all the ones I can.”

If everyone existed solely to help Lawrence and Holo, then that might be possible in the end. But Lawrence knew better than to think that way.

“Yet if you could solve every problem that easily, you’d probably have lived too long.”

“Hmm.. heh. True.”

Myuri filled Lawrence’s cup with wine again.

“At any rate, I’m glad I saw the day where I could fulfill our ancestor’s promise to the wolf. I hope the two of you will at least relax and recover from your trip. After all, Diva’s paying.”

In response, Lawrence drank all the wine in his cup.

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The next day, Holo kept staring at the ceiling. She had cried herself to sleep before sunset, then woke up around midnight and just stared off into space. She was probably awake the entire night after that.

It turned out that Myuri's life wasn't as relaxed as he let on yesterday. He wouldn't even let Lawrence leave their room now. A luxurious dinner was sent up to their room, including white bread, roasted chicken and venison, quail soup, boiled beef, and even carp with vegetables. Later, they were sent oranges, raisins and dried raspberries. And if that wasn't enough, they were also given whatever alcohol they wanted. Beer, wine, even liquor.

Lawrence strongly suspected that Diva wasn't going to shoulder the cost. Myuri was probably paying for it out of his own pocket, in deference to Holo. Lawrence suspected Holo would devour all of that delicious food and snap back into a better mood, but sadly that wasn't the case at all. She waited for Lawrence to wake up, casually greeted him, and then nibbled on some bread and took a few sips of wine.

In the end, Lawrence couldn't bring himself to waste the food. He ate until his stomach was about to burst. They put what could be stored in with their luggage, and even left a plate out for the teenager who was sent up to tidy things up afterward. Thankfully, at least Holo smiled when she saw how much Lawrence was struggling to eat the food.

Whenever Holo couldn't take it anymore, she would automatically come to him. All Lawrence had to do was be there for her, which was good because he didn't really know how to comfort her. If he dared to say anything, he knew it would just backfire and turn her against him.

He'd just never really lost someone that important to him. The only way he could learn how it felt would be to lose Holo. But then who would be there to comfort him if that happened? Who would want to be there? By the time his thoughts reached this stage, he couldn't bear to continue. Holo was the most important thing to him right now, and would continue to be in the future.

She was resting her head on his shoulder as she stared at the sky outside their window. He held her hand in his, and ran his fingers over her nails. They were smooth, but also cold from the dry winter air. Neither he nor Holo actually felt cold, because they were under a blanket, but as his fingers touched her nails her ears scratched up against his face.

Having a companion to travel with was amazing. They depended on you, and could be depended-on. But when Holo pulled her hand back and put her face on his shoulder, he realized that he wouldn't be able to keep her from crying and reflexively held her more tightly.

"Hey, let's go out!"

Her nose just kept wiggling, as if she couldn't hold her tears back any longer. Perhaps just sitting there on Myuri's dime was good enough, but Lawrence was a merchant. He needed to

keep moving to earn money. So even if Holo disagreed with him, he wanted to insist that they go outside for a while. Every time she was hurt or sad she just sat there, stuck like she had been in Pasloe's wheat fields. Now that he was in the picture, he felt that he had to encourage her. Otherwise their entire time together would feel meaningless.

“But wear another layer, it might get cold.”

There was no medicine to cure her wounds, but he didn't want her to get any colder. She could always just take off an extra layer if she felt too warm. She looked at him flatly through her tears, but eventually nodded. He forced himself to say “great!” and began getting ready.

He was treating her like a princess, like he did when she was drunk. He helped put on her belt, shoes, and fur coat. He tidied her hair, concealed her ears, and wrapped her fox scarf around her. She fidgeted at first, but soon gave up and let him do it. Of course, he held her hand to help her stand up from the bed. She was still an emotional wreck, so he wanted to find a way to make her feel better. Even a forced smile was better than nothing at this point.

He took her hand and pulled her outside with him. Maybe she'd cried too much, or was simply too tired, but she turned her eyes away from the sun as though it was blinding her. Everyone, even travelers, liked sunny days in the winter. Everyone except Holo.

His very first thought was to ask her what she wanted to eat, but that only made him feel worse about not knowing how else to cheer her up, so he didn't. He figured he'd just bring it up when he got hungry enough, rather than asking. Instead, he just pulled her into the crowd along the road.

He'd asked the teenager serving them to take them to the back door to avoid the mercenaries on the first floor. Really, it was a loading dock rather than a back door, but that hardly mattered. It wasn't as bad here as it was on the main street, but it was still quite crowded. Many people had to carry their goods on their heads to make it through.

Foods like chicken, pork, duck, and fresh vegetables were rare in the winter, so the odds were good that they were being taken to captains of mercenary bands like Myuri. One wagon Lawrence peeked into was even carrying honeycombs. He could tell even through the small gaps in the crate just how high-grade the honey must be. The trees here in the north were mighty indeed, if bears and dogs hadn't already eaten the honey.

Holo wouldn't have any trouble eating honeycomb, especially with her human hands, but she wasn't in the mood. She was too lost in the fact that she wouldn't see Myuri again, and that wasn't something that just going outside for honeycomb would help.

Things might have been easier for her if his story had been a grander one, but all she knew was that he'd sacrificed his claw, it had been broken into halves, and the only message for her was little more than a friendly joke. It was simply not in the realm of possibility that Myuri was still

alive. If he was, he would have left a different message for her.

“Ow..”

Hearing that, Lawrence finally realized that he was overdoing it.

“..sorry.”

He unconsciously let her hand go, but soon took it again. Even if he was overdoing it, he figured too much was better than too little. He never wanted to regret looking back on his time with Holo while thinking “it would have been nice if I did that.”

“Hey, check out the town square! It’s so crowded this morning.”

He said that as his eyes scanned the shops on the main intersection. There was a building with a storefront on the first floor, and likely studios and living quarters on the second. On the opposite corner was a domed building beside the square. He heard the sound of musical instruments among the noisy crowds, and so he held her hand and took her there.

First he found her a seat at a table (which was still a bit moist with morning dew), then he ran to the shopkeeper (who was still preparing his stall for the day). The man looked at him with a mixture of admiration and contempt for bringing a girl here so early in the morning, but soon smiled and began serving them.

Lawrence paid the man with Plazi copper coins, which the moneychangers in Lenos had recommended. The man seemed uneasy, however. The exchange rate was apparently higher than Lawrence realized, but he just paid a bit more. He was too busy to worry about bargaining right now.

He returned to Holo and set some warm milk with honey and beer down next to her on the table. He then realized that the music he was hearing was just a troupe practicing on the street corner. It wasn’t very good. It would take them a while just to get through one song at this rate, and they were quite close to their table. He motioned to Holo to try the warm milk and bubbly ale, but she just picked up the milk with a bored look in her eyes. He didn’t mind drinking the entire beer on his own though, even if it was watered down. He just treated it like a chaser after a luxurious meal.

Lesco really was a lively place. Lots of people moved at their own pace, flowers sat on every windowsill, and with the sun shining so brightly it might as well not even be winter. It was amazing how different it was from all the rumors they’d heard.

Still, he was no longer surprised about his expectations being challenged. Holo wasn’t a dreamy-eyed little maiden. She must have realized that she might never see Myuri again, and tried her best to prepare for that. And so he wasn’t even surprised when she barely drank any

of her milk and just made a blunt, half-hearted comment.

“I cannot smile right now.”

She wasn’t even looking at him, so he quickly averted his eyes and resumed staring at the practicing musicians.

“It’s alright.”

“Then.. thank you.”

She touched the fox scarf around her neck and continued.

“I.. am so relieved to hear you say that.”

He drank his beer, a bit disappointed by how watered-down it really was.

“I’m used to saying stupid things.”

Just like he did in the alley in Lenos. Holo didn’t seem to know whether to laugh or cry. In the end she slowly breathed in and out, and her suspicious smile was soon gone.

“Mind if I say something stupid right now?”

She was surprised by his sudden question, and slowly turned her eyes back to her cup of milk before nodding slightly.

“I only know what I was told last night. You were listening in, I’m sure?”

She nodded.

“Then you already know he’ll answer any question you might have for him. I’ll even join you, if you feel too awkward asking him yourself.”

The Wisewolf sharply looked at him, but her eyes soon fell back down and closed.

“I am staying out of this.”

“How rare to hear you say that.”

Her eyes reopened and mildly stared at him after he said that. He hadn’t yet won a smile, but her clear eyes were at least showing signs of life again. He could tell she was starting to feel a bit better.

“Then if you want, you can tell me about him instead.”

Of course he was talking about the time she spent with Myuri in Yoitsu, and whatever she felt like talking about. But she didn't reply for a while, and just drank some more of her milk. Well, that was fine. If she'd rather not talk about it, he didn't want to force her. In the end, she came up with a quip.

"I would really rather not see you jealous right now."

He shrugged it off, just happy to see her trying to joke around again.

"Well, I guess I'll just leave it at that. Who cares how much your rival's earned as long as you both do well."

Merchants liked to use that line in weddings. Holo just stared off into space toward the musicians, though he could tell from her subtle expression that she was feeling a bit better now.

"So should we continue our walk, or just sit here and listen to third-rate music?"

He wanted to gauge just how much her mood had improved. It must be painfully obvious that he was trying to comfort her, and indeed she pouted as though annoyed with him.

"*You* are the one who wanted to go outside."

Being there for her sure wasn't easy. She looked normal on the outside, but deep down she wasn't comfortable with being shown affection. She was really emotional for a wolf, but at least her smile brought happiness to others.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Hmph."

She then quickly downed her milk. The shopkeeper had given them a small cup of milk, seeing her size, but she still seemed to enjoy it. She set it down with a noisy clink, then dried her lips with her forearm and pointed at Lawrence's chin as well.

"You want me to chug mine too?"

If he dared remind her that his was beer, she'd just call him something like a "useless male". But he wasn't against chugging the beer. He'd gladly play the fool for her. He'd been doing so since the day they'd met.

"..What?"

He'd finished and set his cup down already, but she was already waiting to smell his cup.

“That was little more than water.”

What a charmless girl. So hard to please. At least she was waving her hand, as if waiting for him to take it. He’d managed to snap her out of her depression, at least a little, so he gripped that hand tightly again, hoping that would be enough to keep her thoughts from drifting back to depression. She didn’t complain this time.

Unlike the lazy-looking square, the street with craftsmen seemed downright smart. The sounds of metal, wood and fur being processed were constant, providing the background beat to which the craftsmen happily worked. The roads here were much more curved compared to the arrow-straight main road. They were paved in large stones, too, like they would be in a southern city.

It looked like craftsmen had poured out of every entrance to work along the side of the street. Some had apprentices darting back and forth, others had huge hills of firewood beside them. Some of the buildings had smoke coming out of their chimneys; those were probably the metalsmiths.

A girl in a light dress and cobs, who seemed even younger than Holo, was pulling a nail out with her full body strength. Holo stopped at her shop, and listened to the smiths pounding metal against their anvils. They seemed to be curving sheet of metal into something rather splendid, and Holo finally smiled when she realized they were making stills.

“The base alcohol is heated in that wide part below, then the vapor goes up those pipes and cools at the top. Stronger drops of alcohol form at the top there, then drip down and collect in that part there.”

He pointed at a still from the street, and Holo’s keen interest made her want to take a closer look. Working craftsmen were generally gruff and easy to annoy, but they’d be more than happy to let a young girl like her take a tour of their shop. Here, however, they seemed too busy to even notice, as a young leaderly man kept barking orders.

“Most of these shops are working with metal.. it’s so obvious this town is run by Diva company..”

There were shops making things like nails and stills, but also locks, knives, and buckets. All of them seemed prosperous. Products were on display everywhere, perhaps to show off, given that such fine products were out of place this far in the north. Diva was a mining company, after all, so they needed to make sure a market existed for their minerals. Besides, fine products were a sign of prosperity. Buying them from the south was a waste of resources, and by the time items arrived they would be outdated anyway. It made more sense to hire good craftsmen like this.

Lawrence and Holo walked onward, and found a factory that made silverware. Mercifully, Holo

had no interest in jewelry. That was a load off Lawrence's mind. He shuddered to think of how quickly he would have been bankrupted if her taste in jewelry was the same as her taste in food.

"Jeez.. they really are impressive.."

He caught himself whispering, realizing that these products were even better than the delicate silverwork of Fran back in Gerube. They were also inexpensive, and would hold tremendous value. Wealthy mines sure had it good. That said, Fran's skills were in demand because she was so good, and was one of a kind. Was Diva simply paying enough money to attract craftsmen from competitors without a fight? Or was there something more going on behind the scenes?

Lawrence swam in his thoughts for a while, and when he snapped back to reality he realized he'd been staring at the various products. Luckily, Holo had been browsing as well, looking at ceremonial swords and items that had decorations of birds and foxes on them. She may not have even noticed his state of mind, so he decided to play it off as if nothing had happened and just looked down at what she was eyeing.

"Would you like that one?"

She shook her head disinterestedly, so they continued wandering around. Lawrence's mind kept wandering, however, impressed by how lively the street was compared to most districts like this. Most cities had more craftsmen than they needed, so they had to impose tariffs and taxes. But if all cities had the same rules, nothing would ever sell, so guildmasters had their work cut out for them.

Ultimately, cities generally put a limit on the number of workshops they housed. After a long, hard training period, apprentices would have to fight tooth and claw to earn a position somewhere. Most of them had to wander around looking for more practical experience. Sadly this often backfired, and when they returned they would have lost any clout they had to begin with. The craftiest of the bunch would marry the widow of a dead master, so masters were always paying close attention to what they ate and the rumors about them.

This all meant that most cities had a veneer of prosperity, but just under that surface there was great turbulence. Lesco, however, seemed free of all these concerns. It was nothing to be upset about, but there had to be a limit. Lawrence was doing his best to reason through this when he noticed a tablet next to one of the guild buildings they walked by. Both he and Holo froze when they read it, turned to face each other, then back to the tablet. They couldn't believe what it said. Wrought large on the chunk of stone was the town's creed.

"Lesco has no restrictions on craftsmen. We hope they will open workshops here, and work hard to hone their skills. We welcome the best of the best, as a free town for all."

As Lawrence stared in disbelief, a seamstress caught his eye and spoke up.

“Are you travelers?”

She was an adult, yet wore a pincushion in her hair, full of needles. Her face and body both called to mind a puffy loaf of bread.

“I couldn’t believe it when I first came here either, but it’s true.”

She spoke of her fortune with a proud smile. She was holding some kind of costume she was working on, and they both saw hope and happiness on her face. It seemed Lesco might be the real deal after all. Lawrence was still trying to make sense of things after the woman had bid them farewell and walked away.

A town that placed no such restrictions on craftsmen generally only did so when a new guild was being formed and rules had yet to be established. He had never seen this level of freedom before. It was difficult to comprehend. An unrestricted town like this was like a garden built without a plan, but also without any walls.

Lawrence was already thinking about which of his friends to tell about this. Of course Norah, the shepherdess, would be first. She dreamed of becoming a seamstress, and that dream could come true here. She was in contact with the Rowen Trade Guild, so if he wrote her a letter, she should receive it.

Holo sighed as he considered these things. All of this was far from interesting to her, especially anything concerning Norah. Since his goal was to cheer Holo up, he quickly pushed these thoughts from his mind.

“Let’s go.”

He pulled her hand and took her to the next street, which was full of workshops for tailors and cobblers. Unlike the strength-based artistry of the previous street, this one was full of more dexterous work like cutting cloth. Rather than hammering like a drumbeat, this place had a softer song. These weren’t people working for the happiness of others, like street performers, they were people who were working for their own happiness.

It seemed to relax Holo to be around so many happy people. She smiled and sighed, listening to everyone else do the same as they hummed the same songs. They were all friends working in the same place; exactly the kind of place Norah would be suited to.

Lawrence had been trying to find something to say, but was at a loss. They browsed the various scarves, shales, and other clothing the locals girls wore, with him planning to buy them in lieu of being unable to comfort Holo otherwise. She didn’t seem to be against the notion, but she didn’t seem to want anything.

It might be because she was only interested in keeping her tail tidy, so she didn't care about other finery, but it left Lawrence at a loss for what to do. He could figure out a merchant's needs and wants, but the only way he could attract a girl was through her stomach. He hated himself for that.

The area they were in was also much larger than he expected, and Holo was already tired to begin with. She just wasn't complaining because she knew he was doing this for her sake. But this was supposed to be about her, not him. Their whole excursion was starting to look like a failure. He probably should have just stayed in the square with her and relaxed.

His mind was beginning to wander in regret, but it was too late for that. Merchants knew better than to just regret things; they were supposed to turn regrets into profits. As such, he began looking around for a place for them to sit down. He'd fancied this a nice area for a pub or restaurant, but there were none. He felt it necessary to find one before Holo began feeling worse.

His anxiety grew as they came to the next street. It was a mix of shops and homes, with many people but a less lively atmosphere. Suddenly they then stopped, as if caught in a crowd of people, in front of an empty building. It wasn't abandoned; it was tidy. The loading dock on the side, the room behind the slightly-ajar front door, and all of the chairs and shelves in view were clean.

With four floors, it was the type of building a company should immediately purchase and start working in. But it had no scent of life in it and it was no illusion. This town had enraptured Lawrence, and now when he read the posting on the door in front of him, Holo was suddenly flung from his mind entirely.

*Twelve hundred Trenni silver, negotiable. Contact Ponds' company.*

The sunny and clear skies seemed to exist solely so he could focus on those words. There was a shop available in this lively, unrestricted town. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that time had stopped right along with his heartbeat. Even his blood had frozen.



By the time he recovered, he had no idea how long he'd been standing there. It just felt like he had suddenly been dropped into the middle of a crowd, the way he began hearing all the noise around him again. But he froze again, realizing that his hand no longer held another.

“Ho-”

He stopped in his tracks, seeing Holo at a stall buying some fried and honeyed bread. His hand instinctively flew to his waist, but his wallet was gone. He tied it to his body, to deter thieves, but the string had long since been untied. Holo simply chewed her bread, expressionless. He had no clue how angry she was, as she remained silent as she returned his wallet.

“..um?”

He tried to speak, but his vacant mind was having trouble turning. He desperately wanted to say something, but all he could do was watch as her hand stuffed some bread into his mouth.

“Mph! Hmm?”

She just stared at him as she kept pushing the bread into his mouth. Other people on the street began watching the spectacle. It was quite some time before she let him go. He was actually more surprised that she parted ways with food, but when she turned her palm upward he had even less of an idea how to respond to her.

“I want another one.”

He didn't even think about how wasteful it might be, he just instinctively handed her more money and watched her head back to the stall. The shopkeeper stared at him until she spoke, then laughed and gave her an extra-large piece of bread dripping with honey. Her poker face remained even as she returned to his side.

“Finally. This is more like it.”

“Wha?”

He couldn't help but ask as she just stared at another empty shop. Was she talking about the bread? He'd taken her outside to ease her mind, brought her everywhere he could, but it was sweets that finally lifted her spirits. His excitement over that revelation earned his foot a good stomp. So good that her foot remained on it for a while.

He'd willfully taken her outside, only to lose himself in the city and forget about her. He had wanted to cheer her up, and ended up staring at this shop instead. He'd even dropped his guard and lost his wallet, which was like losing his life, on top of forgetting Holo. Of course she was angry. No apology could make up for it.

“You forgot about me at that metal shop, too.”

Hearing that made him flinch.

“You turn into such a little kid when we shop around. What is this? What is that? How much is this? And that?”

The bread in her hand was probably hot, given how the honey had seeped into it. She would have normally devoured it right away, but she hadn’t even taken a single bite yet. She had to be angry, to the point where he really had no defense. Even trying to apologize would be like throwing oil onto a fire.

He turned into a puppy, just standing there hoping her rage would burn out sooner rather than later. But it turned out to be all that she wanted to say, and her foot was quickly lifted. After sighing, she even took his hand again. Even more stunning, that sigh seemed to be one of embarrassment.

“But now, finally.. this is more like it.”

“..?”

She looked up at him and started to polish the bread off in huge bites, clearly showing her displeasure.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

She stepped on his foot again when he tilted his head and stared at her. Her hand wasn’t letting go, and her face was red, but obviously not because of the cold weather. Half her bread was already gone, and because it was so hot she kept sniffing and panting.

“You are as happy as the stupidest mutt.”

Once more she sighed, then continued sniffing. She wasn’t looking at him, but he could tell she was struggling. He stared at her face like it was more alluring than the sweetest honeyed bread, thinking about how she’d chased down her old companion only to find that a message was all that was left. A sad message that only she knew, which kept repeating itself in her mind.

It finally dawned on him what he had to offer her, even though the only advantage he had over Myuri was being alive. He had goals, and would see them through. There was no way he’d actually buy a shop here, no matter how cheap it was. He didn’t know anything about this town, and it was a place controlled by the Diva company. He was actually unnerved by how lively the place was.

But this wasn’t the time for realism. What they needed now was hope, even false hope, so he

took one last look at the empty shop and then took her hand again.

“Sorry, mind if we go back?”

Holo looked up at him.

“I’d like to draw my dream shop again.”

Her lips twitched, so he knew he was probably right. The anger in her eyes melted away into a soft, doughy look.

“But this is the shop you want, is it not?”

She just had to ask, snapping them back to boring reality again. He didn’t think for a second that she would agree with opening a shop here. He carefully chose his response.

“Cheap and inexpensive aren’t the same things. It’s prudent to remember that.”

It was an important fact. Her ears shifted, and her expression became vague.

“If you miss this chance, do not try to rationalize it by saying this shop must have been bad.”

“Of course I won’t. You know me better than that, don’t you?”

Her eyes grew wide and she craned her neck, revealing an evil grin. It was the same grin that led to his mistake in a Lenos alley. Thankfully, humans were capable of learning. He snatched a piece of her honeyed bread, right where she’d chewed it and ate it, fancying that it must be what her lips tasted like. As usual, she seemed to read his mind, and sighed while poking him.

“You really are a fool.”

It seemed that they were finally back to normal.

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He’d drawn his dream shop many times now. In fact, this wasn’t the first time he’d done so in front of Holo, but it was the first time she joined him. It warmed him to the core and, better still, Holo seemed to have recovered as well.

“How will the sunlight come in?”

She debated the floor plan with him, then the placement of furniture, then the sizes of the windows. At first he wasn’t sure if she was forcing herself, but it soon became clear that she was enjoying herself with her running commentary; she didn’t stop saying things like “this would make the place more lively” and “that will just look stupid.” It made him suddenly

wonder if wolves were this fussy with their dens.

“This place would get the most sun.. hmm.. we will have to put my bed there.”

The best-lit room on the second floor was generally reserved for the owner of a company. Lawrence couldn't help but twitch in annoyance, even if they were just doing this for fun. It was somehow starting to feel less like a dream and more like something that might actually be, so he started getting serious.

“That would be the owner's room.”

Of course, Holo pretended she didn't hear his complaint and kept right on talking. He just couldn't keep up with her, even when they were playing around. It was always such a source of frustration that he'd even forgotten that the point of this exercise was to cheer her up.

“Hmm, is there no room in your shop for me?”

“Of course not.”

“How can that be?”

She spoke softly with a gentle smile, and he couldn't bring himself to reply. Not even to curse her. But she still put her finger across his lips and spoke.

“Say no more, or all my hard work will be wasted.”

She was joking, but with a serious tone. This really wasn't the time for him to add to her worries. She was already struggling with the news about Myuri, he reminded himself. That smile she had on her face now was genuine. He stopped staring into her eyes and nodded. He continued drawing that room on the second floor.

“Oh..”

She was surprised at what he drew, so he spoke.

“I can't very well handle a shop like this on my own. I'll need someone to help me.”

It was such a forced line that it sounded a bit nauseating, so he quickly added a desk to the room as she softly chuckled. They then added some more furniture and goods to their imagined shop. It felt like it was so possible, even if it wasn't. Holo giggled and argued with Lawrence as they continued, but after the basic floor plan was done, they had less to argue about.

They grew quieter and quieter, just enjoying their imaginary ideal shop. Holo was so relaxed it looked like she was practically in that shop already, like she was enjoying a lovely spring afternoon. In fact, she eventually began to nod off. Of course, Lawrence had no desire to rudely

wake her, and he knew she didn't want to go to bed anyway. He just kept working as she napped, and watched her each time she woke up and dried her mouth.

In the end, though, he noticed that each time she woke up it was with a tinge of worry. At first it looked just like a person who wondered if they ought to just go to bed, but he soon realized the truth. Each time she would look at him before returning to sleep, it was as if making sure he was really still there.

She had lived for hundreds of years. Her time with Lawrence was incredibly brief, and must seem like a nap to her. Even her old peers were gone now, the ones she'd always hoped to meet again. She clearly wanted to stay awake as long as she could.

Lawrence had told himself so many times that he had too little time, and had to keep trading rather than just being lazy on their trip. He'd told her that too, on many occasions. But really, she was the one with too little time. She wanted to have more, even just an extra second.

It was now clear just how brief his time with her truly was. He set down his pencil and ran his finger along her bangs. She frowned in annoyance, and her ears flattened slightly, but she was still asleep. He stared at her face, feeling awful. They had come here to find the Myuri mercenary band and see what Diva was up to. But there was nothing they could do to stop them.

They could act like heroes all they wanted to, but it wouldn't help. Lawrence was just a traveling merchant, and even if Holo could fight hundreds of people at once, their opponent was a mining firm with tens of thousands of supporters. They even had expert soldiers worrying about them, like the captain of the Myuri mercenaries. It didn't take a genius to know that he would be their shield.

He might have promised to do everything he could to help Holo, but she wouldn't want him to throw his life away to keep Yoitsu from being occupied. He wasn't sure, but he didn't think she would fight for Yoitsu anymore either. At least not to the death. That was what his gut told him.

She might be a giant wolf, but she'd been happier traveling in this small body with a merchant, wandering the corners of the world. It seemed that in spite of how painful it was to her, she was trying to catch up with the modern era. Her desire to go home and find her old friends was for closure, no matter how unpleasant the results were. She had lagged in those wheat fields for centuries, and it wasn't her fault that the world was passing her by.

He caught himself touching her hair again and wondered what he could possibly do in Lesco. Even if he found out what Diva was up to, would he have to surrender to their will? In that case, shouldn't he just be a selfish merchant and get rich in spite of everyone's anger and shock? None of his options were good ones.

His mind drifted back to the Great Brondel Monastery of the snowy Winfield Kingdom. He

remembered Holo's words as they played in the snow, but this time he was in too deep to just leave. He knew what was going to happen even if he left, so he had to do something.

His anger at not being a hero was palpable; Holo was so important that he wanted to be one just to be able to help her, even if he couldn't quite put it into words. He would die for her. She was asleep now, but her face looked tired from all her tears. How would he make her smile again? Even a silly grin or forced smile would do, so he had to start planning for tomorrow.

He sat looking at the hearth as he thought it over. The last kind of smile he wanted to see was the kind where she was covering old wounds. He wanted to see the bright smile of someone looking forward to a fresh future under the sun. But no matter how much he thought, nothing was coming to him. All he could do was be her fool, and do his best to make her laugh.

By the time he finally moved her onto the bed, she was in a deep sleep. He tended to her as he usually did before she fell asleep, then set her down comfortably. She looked so defenseless right now, as soft as a cat and just as warm. He had to struggle to suppress the urge to take things too far, but he managed.

In the end he just caressed her face once more and put on his coat. He needed to go outside for a bit. But before he did, he placed the picture they had drawn next to her pillow. He chuckled at the strange groan she let out, presumably because she had smelled the ink.

He walked down the hall, but didn't want to go downstairs just yet. Instead he walked up to the next floor, looking for a specific person. He hadn't heard their footsteps, but assumed they would be in their room.

He coughed and cleared his throat to swallow his nervousness, then knocked on the door. The man who opened the door was an adult with silver hair and an impressive trimmed beard. He was the staff sergeant of the Myuri mercenaries.

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Chapter 3

The staff sergeant's name was Moid Markus. Lawrence was impressed with his grip when Markus actively reached his hand out to shake Lawrence's. After sitting down, Lawrence took note of the piles of paper and scrolls, as well as the odd mixture of quills and swords.

"You want to know what's going on in town?"

Moid blinked when Lawrence explained why he had come. He stared at Lawrence with his large, animalian eyes. It seemed that Myuri had not told anyone about Holo and Lawrence, but they must have surely guessed regardless. After all, they had been ordered to treat them as honored guests. This was corroborated by the mere fact that Moid was even taking the time to talk to Lawrence.

"Yes. I took a stroll around town this morning, and many things caught the attention of my inner merchant."

Especially that stone tablet that read "no restrictions on craftsmen." Craftsmen were normally as restricted as caged animals, at least according to a landowner Lawrence had once spoken to, who saw it as a great strategy. Every town Lawrence had been to was very restrictive. Of course, he was only asking Moid out of curiosity, not suspicion.

"Well.. this place is quite unique."

It felt strange to be treated so politely by Moid. Lawrence felt less like a welcomed guest, and more like he was being waited-on by a servant. It made him see why Holo hated being treated this way.

"I noticed a stone tablet that said that there are 'no restrictions on craftsmen.'"

Moid stared at him from the other end of the cluttered desk, then flashed him a twisted, stony smile.

"I see.. so that's why you stared at that building for so long."

So they were being watched back then; that was a bit embarrassing, but hardly a surprise. Lawrence was only doing what he had to do so Holo would smile again. And now, his investigations into Diva company were beginning to comfort even him. After all, they might lead to him opening his own shop.. it was even more important now. If Diva wasn't going to war, and wasn't going to ruin Yoitsu, there was even a chance he might open his shop here. He just had to ease his conscience first.

"Exactly. That's why I'm here."

“So you’re curious about whether there are restrictions on merchants opening shops, are you?”

Lawrence gave a cautious nod.

“Indeed.”

He wanted to come here after Holo was asleep because he didn’t want her to see such a poor performance. He wanted to maintain some dignity in her eyes.

“There’s no branch of my guild here, and they told me to stay away from here, but still..”

“It’s too much of an opportunity to overlook.”

It seemed that all high-ranking mercenaries thought like merchants. It was possible they even thought more like Lawrence did than all of those guild-affiliated city merchants.

“Based on all of my time here, I doubt there would be many restrictions.”

Moid gave the obvious answer.

“But I’m sure you already figured out why, Mr. Lawrence.”

Hearing himself called “mister” almost brought a smile to his face, but Moid was a mercenary. They took social status even more seriously than merchants did. Smiling now would be disrespectful to someone treating him so well, so Lawrence remained serious.

“I think I’ve got the idea, given that the metalworker’s avenue looks like something from the south, and even the innkeeper here doesn’t look very northern.”

“Quite. This is an immigrant town.”

Mercenaries went wherever the fighting lead them. They were quite familiar with colonization efforts.

“But it’s quite young, and hardly famous yet. Maybe that’s because the landowners are trying to keep from upsetting their neighbors, since we’re quite far from Diva’s main base.”

That was Lawrence’s guess as well. If all they wanted to do was mine, they would just do business with the villages and towns next to the mines.

“They’ve gathered people from the empires south of Ploania, and people on the western coasts. Lenos may not have stopped you from coming, but I’ll wager they didn’t tell you much about Lesco, right?”

Lawrence nodded.

“The merchants there knew virtually nothing.”

“This place was founded by Diva company, so you’d expect it to be a simple mining town. But it’s so prosperous and lively that Diva wants to keep it a big secret.”

Mining companies liked to keep their prosperous towns a secret, so that checked out. Traveling merchants were kept in the dark so the big players wouldn’t figure it out.

“Diva is, after all, quite powerful these days. But for all their wealth and status, they still have to avoid being exploited by the wealthy. They have to pick and choose their fights. It’s a risky enterprise, especially with so many people from failed companies trying to make a fresh start here.”

Moid took a pause before putting his hands together and speaking with a softer expression.

“So..”

A staff sergeant had to hire mercenaries from people who were considered trash by society, so it made sense for Moid to feel a bit of a bond with Diva in that regard.

“Those who are going through hard times will be more willing to abandon their dark past and faith. Diva feels they can run things more smoothly by giving those people a new hope, rather than restricting them. And as far as the northern lands go.. well, the captain already told you about that.”

Lawrence quickly recalled that Myuri mentioned the issues with land ownership, and that there was no easy solution. Diva was carefully using this to their advantage.

“It’ll be great if everything goes smoothly, and things are off to a fine start. Lesco’s craftsmen already have a great reputation.”

Moid pulled the hilt of his sword to reveal a fine blade with a blueish tinge.

“And it’s not just refugees from the south. Everyone needs to make a living, so just the temptation of food and freedom will bring all sorts of skilled people here. In the end..”



He released the hilt of his sword and it slid back into the sheath naturally. He was a staff sergeant, but he clearly had brains. When Lawrence considered that, he felt ashamed - like a naive young kid.

“You end up with an unbelievably prosperous town.”

Traveling merchants like Lawrence were the sort who’d been everywhere and had much experience. But mercenaries were war survivors who were far beyond that level. They’d walked on every inch of soil, burned towns down, and helped rebuild them. And Moid didn’t seem to be being optimistic, he was truly convinced of this town’s prosperity.

A free town where people could make a fresh start. If that were true, then anyone desperate who heard of this place would think that God hadn’t given up on them.

“As such I feel that opening a shop here would be the best choice you could make for yourself. We came here because we heard a lot of bad rumors, but found this place instead. I don’t even think Diva wants to start a war.”

If that wasn’t their aim, then Lawrence really would be in heaven here. It was a new place without a lot of complicated issues, so it was perfect for a traveler like him.. and Holo. He realized it was stupid for him to keep thinking this way, but Hugh, the sheep in Gerube, had shown him that creatures like Holo could live among humans. Even Diana, a bird, and Huskins, a sheep pretending to be a shepherd, had made new homes for themselves. Many of their kind had settled in this way.

Lawrence had been so lonely that he’d begun to think he might never get a chance like this. But it was a possibility. There were a lot of examples that it was real, so he really could become one of those examples. He had to calm himself by swallowing hard. Moid smiled calmly in response. He seemed to be looking at Lawrence like a young potential recruit. It made Lawrence feel a mix of strange things; joy, embarrassment, even anger. In the end it felt like he had to resist a little.

“I’ve always heard that the victors are the ones who arrive after the fight.”

Moid smiled proudly.

“I really wish I was still as young as you are.”

Lawrence smiled, feeling lucky that he’d come here without Holo.

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When Holo woke up, Lawrence wasn’t there. He had known better than to wake her at noon, when Moid invited him to the first floor to eat with the other mercenaries. Both Moid and

Lawrence knew that the next time they met, they would be enemies. The wolf would become the lamb; the prey, the hunter. Moid had made his invitation with that understanding.

Even if they couldn't coexist, they still had a lot in common. They spoke about how tiring long trips were, and shared cooking tips. It was a nice chat. Myuri hadn't returned yet, but apparently the captains of the mercenaries were always meeting with other captains and nobles. Myuri's visits to the inn were rare, so Moid turned out to be more like their manager; they actually seemed to respect him like a father.

Lawrence was used to traveling alone. It was quite a change to see such camaraderie, even if he had his own companion now. But if he really did open a shop, he'd have his own staff like this to help him and share meals as their business grew. Lawrence really hoped it might turn out that way. It went without saying that he wanted Holo to be the one who sat closest to him.

Lunch went by quickly as his thoughts shifted, and when he returned to their room he saw Holo awake and looking for him. He even heard her breathe softly in relief when she saw him.

"Nngg.."

She let out a mighty yawn, her smooth movements clearly not an act. Sleeping really could heal a lot of things. In fact, she kept yawning and stretching for so long she seemed to forget the piece of paper in her hand. Apparently she had slept with it in her hands, given how crumpled it was right now. She hummed in satisfaction after the sound of the paper snapped her out of it.

"Would you like some lunch?"

Lawrence was counting his coins and making some calculations on paper as he asked. A proper nun wouldn't eat at this time, only when the Church bells rang, but thankfully the Church had little presence here. According to Moid, the clergy here were really just here to strengthen financial ties with the Diva company. Just like in Ruvineigen, precious minerals could be worth much more to the Church than coin. A bar of blessed gold was considered a powerful item. It wasn't just merchants who stood to benefit from trade here.

"Well.. a little."

"We still have some raisins packed away."

They were leftovers from the morning and previous night. He wondered if she was having second thoughts about not eating much before. She slowly found the bag of raisins and dragged it to the desk Lawrence was working at. After a quick greeting, she sat on that desk, still in her blanket. She had to like how warm the inn's blankets were; in fact, her scent had already seeped into it.

"You should think ahead and make sure you want to eat them all. There aren't any more."

He was doing his best to be reasonable with her, given how attracted he was to even just her smell right now. He knew how childish she was with her food, and in a couple of days they would probably regret not saving some of the raisins. But she ignored him, and he fought over whether to just be happy that her mood had recovered. Her legs dangled as she ate, and she looked down on him.

“Well, I should probably listen to you once in a while.”

She set a few more raisins on the desk, then tied the bag back up. As he gasped at that rare occurrence, she gently pressed one of the raisins into his mouth.

“After all, you are fighting so hard to stay in control.”

When he moaned, the raisin fell out of his mouth. She was holding his collar in her other hand, so he couldn’t back off. He was trapped; he couldn’t disagree with her. He remembered what had happened in Lenos, and stole a glance at her to see if she was angry with him. However, what was on her face was a puzzled smile. He guessed it was a look of pity, but that only earned him a flick on the forehead.

“You truly understand nothing.”

“?”

He wasn’t about to disagree, especially when she was being deliberately vague. The common wisdom was that “a woman’s mind isn’t easily read”, wasn’t it? He picked up the raisin that fell. It tasted sweet and sour at the same time. Holo stood up, drinking some water out of thirst. She brought the water skin back with her.

“Alright. When I was asleep, what did you do?”

He felt the water skin hit the back of his head, and a chill ran up his spine like he’d been shot in the dark. Her next words relaxed him, however.

“You wrote to that shepherd lass?”

So she had been concerned about that since they took their stroll? Despite that, she leaned up against his back. It might have been endearing had she said something like “I will not allow you to think about other females,” but her behavior was more like a master reminding their slave who the boss was. In other words, Holo was back to normal. His face twisted in spite, but she just smiled and turned his head to make him look at her.

“I was too worried that you’d cry if I wrote it behind your back, so I waited to get your permission.”

“Hmm.. that was not bad.”

“May I?”

“Alright, go ahead.”

They were so close right now that they looked like cats touching their foreheads together. He sighed, and began arranging the pile of gold and silver coins on the desk.

“What were you working on?”

“Working out what we have left. I haven’t had any time to do it lately.”

“Um..”

She began like this whenever she was worried about their budget. She stared at the raisin still in her hand and then turned back to him.

“Did I.. eat too much?”

He had warned himself not to laugh, but he couldn’t help it. As expected, it earned him a kick.

“Oh don’t get angry. I wasn’t calculating expenses, just what’s left of our profits. I’ve been way too busy since I met you to figure out our expenses.”

In truth, he had a rough idea, but wasn’t sure how accurate his guess was. They had received gifts from others, and stayed in rooms for free, so it wasn’t all that much. That wasn’t even counting the loans he’d been able to repay, so in fact he was actually much better off than he was before.

When he counted, he saw that most of his business had earned some profit, but he’d ended up failing every time a bigger chance came around. Still, at least he was in the green. He felt like thanking the heavens. Over the last half-year, he’d also been living a rich life, which was a big win in and of itself. And none of that even counted the fact that he had been living that life with Holo.

“What is with that strange look on your face..”

She saw the look in his eyes and frowned. But he was unafraid.

“Nothing at all.”

She resumed eating. This was what wealth meant to Lawrence. He kept looking up at her, and smiled. She stared back at him with anger in her eyes, but didn’t leave his side.

He'd lately begun thanking the heavens for his fortune, which now included seventeen-hundred Trenni silver and an unbelievable network of contacts. Altogether, it was hardly a dream for him to buy the building, stock, and hire employees.

"Oh, that is quite a lot."

She was sighing at the figures on the paper like she had finally spotted her prey. Just like last time, Lawrence put his hands between her and the coins on the desk.

"This money is important."

Her ears immediately shot up, and his mind went blank when she flicked his nose like there had been a fly on it.

"Of course! I know that! Who do you think I am?"

She began her cavalcade of complaints at the stupid, impolite man in front of her. But even if she began biting, he was still happy to have her attention.

"You have worked so hard for that."

She said that so seriously that he was more embarrassed than happy to hear it. He turned away before replying.

"That's quite a painful joke to hear."

She grabbed his nose and pulled it this way and that, but at least he was still the object of her focus. If she'd had enough of him, she would have been fussing with her tail by now. Not today. She was scolding and prodding him, even if she was going to help him write a letter to Norah.

It could be that she just wanted his attention, but it really was more likely that she was just hoping to see what he wrote so he didn't sneak in anything inappropriate to Norah. Holo was a brown-haired wolf, and Norah was a golden-haired shepherd.

Eve was completely different from her, so Holo didn't really care much about her. But her hostility toward Norah stemmed from her being her exact opposite. Norah was the type of girl who would gently snuggle with you under the same blanket, but Holo was the kind who laughed loudly as she held her beer mug aloft in the bar.

Those kinds of devilish thoughts were running through his mind as he began his letter to Norah. He was doing his best to avoid Holo's gaze and keep her focused on his writing, but it was tough. If he cringed, she would surely move in to write the letter herself. If he let her do that, it would surely become an invitation to a duel, so the situation was dire.

However, she let him write the letter himself, even though it was addressed to Norah. He

figured it was because he was really writing to her so she could make her dream come true as well. Holo ate sloppily as he wrote, and kept saying childish things like “you really do prefer poor girls, huh?” Still, he knew that she was murmuring like that so she wouldn’t say what was really on her mind.

“So what is the situation?”

She was trying to act naturally, so she waited until he was sprinkling sand over his ink before she asked. But despite her efforts, her voice wavered a little. Clearly she wasn’t asking him if he liked Norah, or about how much money he had. She was being devious. She knew why he was working out his profits. It was obvious enough, after she saw him standing so idiotically in front of that empty shop. He put on his best merchant’s manner and replied as matter-of-factly as someone talking about the weather.

“Hmm? Oh, well I can open a shop anytime I want.”

He debated whether to add “if we’re talking about money,” but he gave up when he saw the side of her face. She was lost in thought.

“Hmm.”

She always kept her thoughts hidden, which lead to several risky situations in the past. He was just as much to blame, of course, given how infrequently he considered her feelings. But more importantly, he’d always taken the wrong approach. Not that long ago, he might have asked her “what’s wrong?” but now he knew better.

He knew for sure that she loved him. It wasn’t the kind of gut feeling one had when they knew they could trust a villager or shopkeeper. It wasn’t related to profits or losses in the slightest. His mind had gone blank, like it was paralyzed, so he forced himself to talk.

“Where do you think I should open my shop?”

He shook the letter to cast off the sand. It was short, and he didn’t like wasting paper, but he knew that if he wrote anything unrelated to business, he would earn Holo’s wrath. But she still turned to him vindictively, as though his thoughts were leaking out.

“That is all we have been talking about lately. Can you not think of something else?”

It was exactly what he expected her to say, so he still answered her slowly and precisely.

“You’re rarely gentle enough for me to be able to ask you such things.”

Her face twisted in anger, as if she’d bitten her tongue. She grumbled as her tail wagged.

“..you are really good at this.”

“Because I’m a merchant.”

“Damn.”

Holo huffed and gently hopped off the desk.

“Anyway. If this town’s company does *anything* I do not like..”

She turned her neck and growled, as though preparing for a fight.

“..then I, this gentle and fragile girl, shall leave.”

Lawrence was shocked at her choice of words. She was just too cunning. She was being even more careful than she liked to say she was.

“It’s not like this is the only town out there. It doesn’t have to be here. Besides,”

He only said “besides” to keep her from talking. He knew how to deal with her now.

“At least let me figure out if I even want to open it here, will you?”

She was normally quite willful, but she also liked to hear others being willful. She liked to feel dependent, and was happy to be pulled along by the hand that held hers. He knew just how different the two of them were. He’d learned to live alone, and to suspect everyone. She’d learned to live alone in Pasloe, but had gone there in the first place because she was lonely and wanted to trust someone. In spite of her sigh and look of scorn, her tail was happily wagging right now.

“..So that is what you were up to while I slept.”

She knew that just asking about Diva’s movements wasn’t going to help much. Her amber eyes stared at him as if to say “foolish males are always the proudest.”

“Very well, then I shan’t mind if you do your little investigations, as long as you remember why we came here.”

She also realized her tail gave her away, but she still wanted to keep up the act. She might as well have added “you love me most when I am like this, do you not?” like she wanted to, because it was the truth. He had no way to deny it.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

He forced a smile as he replied, and she finally laughed. After all, any investigations about the shop coincided with their mission to figure out what Diva was doing. They controlled the town,

so if he wanted to run a shop here he had to learn more about them anyhow.

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It would be fastest to ask the locals, so they started at the manger. The teenager was feeding the horses as they chatted, and his attitude as they chatted was carefree.

“You want to know about our town?”

Cole was honest, but also too humble. This lad had more experience.

“Well, I hope I’ll be able to help.”

“This looks like a nice place to trade, so I’m trying to learn more. Even just a bit about the atmosphere will do.”

“Atmosphere..”

The boy didn’t stop working as he thought. He just kept distributing feed to the horses, tightening knots, and clearing trash. Lawrence wasn’t sure if he was just expected to work hard, or did so out of his own volition. It almost seemed like the latter.

“Well, I’m not a local.”

That was his sudden answer.

“I came here on a boat from the south. It took several weeks, and we were hit by a disease and all my friends died. And yet-“

His blue, gem-like eyes looked into Lawrence’s.

“If I wrote home and told everyone, they would come too.”

Older towns didn’t accept many newcomers. Even Amati, the boy who had fancied Holo, had to go north when he left his hometown.

“Why? Because it’s so lively here?”

Hearing that, the teenager lifted a bucket of feed that seemed to weigh more than he did, then set it down somewhere else. With that, he finally flashed a smile befitting a lad of his age.

“Freedom.”

It was just as Lawrence had read on that stone tablet, and later heard from Moid. Even Lawrence was starting to want to believe it was true, after so many failures he was suspicious

of any good news. If Diva company was managing this place and hoping to open more mines, then it did seem more and more likely.

Of course, Moid might actually be telling the truth, and Lawrence was just being overly cautious. But he had to avoid being swept away in optimism. After all, what he'd heard about Diva outside of this town had little to do with "freedom". He had to be careful, so he thanked the teenager and left.

Holo remained silent the entire time.

"Let's go ask some others."

As they walked toward the square, he chatted with as many stall owners as he could. They all repeated the same words: freedom and liveliness. Even when he started the conversation with something like "I heard that a war is brewing" people just smiled and shook their heads.

This town, they all insisted, was lively and was being run well by Diva. They didn't have any desire to fight anyone. Someone even suggested that they might be working to stop any fights in the vicinity. Everyone was free here, and Diva company was a bunch of normal people.

Holo and Lawrence were still struggling to adjust their mental image of the company.

"Did we just get the wrong impression?"

He asked aloud as they sat on some steps to rest.

"It's tough to just accept this."

"And yet I do not think they are lying."

He noticed Holo's ears moving, and nodded. If everyone was lying, it would be too tough to keep it up and someone would eventually slip up. Also, it was plainly obvious how well the town was doing.

The building for Diva company turned out to be quite far from the square. It seemed to be a place for people to talk business, more than a warehouse or store front. It was neither overly marvellous or pitiful. It had an air of stability and safety about it, the ideal place for normal people to work.

One didn't get the impression that it was a place with nefarious goals; it exuded a feeling of freedom like rays of sunlight. It amplified the sentiments the townsfolk were spreading. Lawrence was now almost ready to accept what he was hearing, but there was one thing that still made him suspicious: it was too good to be true. Things could only ever seem perfect on the outside, and every time Lawrence thought otherwise it was he who suffered.

“What will you do now?”

Holo didn't seem to be paying it any mind. Was he being too suspicious, or was there a darker truth here? He couldn't decide which was more likely, and realized that he needed someone to force him to make a judgment call.

“What *should* I do..”

He was simply perplexed. Holo sneezed as though her nose had been tickled by the wind, and then stared off at something with squinted eyes while rubbing her nose.

“What is it?”

“Oh? Oh.”

He figured she was seeing something with her eagle eyes, but she just put her hands behind her back and held them while shrugging, then spoke shyly.

“It just seems a waste to leave here because you are suspicious.”

He was so stunned that it took him a while to reply.

“I see.”

“This is a happy place.”

“With good food?”

“And good wine, and 'tis lively. Yet here you are, trying to expose the dark side of the company. It seems a waste. When I think of you opening a shop here, I can only see it as a happy thing.”

She bent her back and tilted her head at him with a smile.

“You really enjoy contemplation. Just you saying you wanted to ‘research whether to open a shop here’ changed my mind, and now this town looks entirely different to me.”

She set her elbows on her knees and put her face in her palms. She stared off around town as though staring further off in the distance, perhaps at something from her ancient past, or in memory of her travels with him. He had been correct; that was obvious now. Her burden was lighter now, albeit slightly, and that was enough to ease his mind. But he had more thought.

“Ah, speaking about the shop, hmm.. there's an important place we haven't gone yet.”

“Oh, more contemplation?”

If Diva was able to keep this place so prosperous, there had to be a flaw somewhere. Towns were built with money, and reading the flow of that money was a merchant's forte. If Lawrence was to open a shop here, he needed to confirm something first.

"Please follow me."

He took her hand and lifted her up, then the two of them strolled quickly and lightly. They were heading to where the moneychangers congregated. It was near the metalworking district, perhaps because the town had no bridges or that the moneychangers' tradition simply wasn't being followed here. They didn't have their own kiosks, either, just crates or mats to sit on.

"Oh, do you need to change coins again?"

That was the first thing Holo asked when she saw all the merchants with their weighted scales. They had brought various coins with them from Lenos, all sitting in their room at the inn.

"It's just that this place is so different from what we heard that the exchange rates in Lenos can't be right."

"What? Do think you were cheated again?"

It took about six days to get here, so even if they had no information it was prudent for them to exchange some money before they came. At first he wanted to lecture her, but hearing her say "again" made it clear what her game was.

"Hush now, just follow me."

He couldn't manage anything more sophisticated than that, but at least she happily grabbed his hand.

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Lawrence walked up to the most idle-looking moneychanger. Holo eyed him, clearly worried about whether it was alright to ask such questions in the open. She was right; it would be better to ask in a more private environment, especially since most of the people around the moneychangers would be travelers who were also unfamiliar with the circumstances of Lesco. But the fact that this man was napping on his crate showed how little he cared about the people standing in lines at other moneychangers.

"Pardon me, I'd like to exchange some coins."

"Nng.."

As one might expect, the middle-aged man's head remained balanced on his hands as he struggled mightily to open his eyes and look at them. He then took a look to see if there were

any other idle moneychangers to push his customers onto.

“Grah.. nng..”

He gave a tired stretch to pop his joints back into place. It seemed like he was better-suited to being on the battlefield than exchanging money.

“Damn. Ah.. sorry, I’m too used to cursing.”

He scratched his head as he spoke, looking nothing like a merchant.

“You wanna exchange coins?”

“Yes.”

Lawrence smiled, and the man studied him and Holo with one eyebrow raised.

“You’re a weird one.”

He was probably just being annoying to show how little he wanted to have Lawrence as a customer.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Ahem, ah, curse my careless tongue.. well, it’s ’cause there’re so many other moneychangers, but you came to my pathetically empty stall. You sure you’re a real merchant?”

Lawrence smiled. The man’s attitude was infuriating, but that just meant he was the right man to ask.

“A long lineup can be the sign of a third-rate moneychanger.”

The man pouted and smiled in response.

“You’re right.”

“That, and no one in line looks like a merchant anyway.”

They were just people here to get some cash and do some shopping; farmers and workers, not professional merchants.

“Huh.. you’ve got a good pair o’ eyes. Damn, what a pain.”

He stretched again, then put the plates on his scales. Holo watched happily from the side; she probably liked this man’s attitude, not caring what other people thought about anything.

“So what’d ya wanna exchange?”

“I’ve got Trenni silver, and wanted whatever you guys use in town here.”

The man stopped in his tracks.

“Hmm.. hmm..”

His hands remained frozen as he began curiously eyeing Lawrence. He then let his hands fall beside the scales with his palms facing upward.

“Five Lute silvers.”

That was about what dinner should cost. Holo peered at him questioningly, but Lawrence still went ahead and paid. He did, however, know more or less what the man was working toward.

“Where are you from?”

“..Lenos.”

With the coins in-hand, the man gave a twisted smile as he heard that.

“They’ll give you a bunch of small coins there.”

Holo eyed Lawrence as though to say “cheated again, were you?”

“Yeah, they gave me fourteen different currencies.”

“Haha, well, I don’t know if it was intentional, but it’s a shame. You shouldn’t’a’given your Trenni away.”

Lawrence had been to the northern frontier, a land called the windless void, so he was well familiar with how currencies should work in the north. Trenni silver should be popular much further north.. this was quite a surprise.

“Ah, I see why you didn’t want to queue up in the lines.. you wanted to know how new the coins you just got are, didn’t’cha?”

He’d figured it out. That was exactly it; Lawrence might save money if he went to the other stalls, but he wouldn’t have been able to closely examine the coins he received with people waiting in line behind him. Moneychangers often intentionally took advantage of just that situation to hand out their poorest-quality coins. Sometimes the least reputable of them would hand out coins so worn they were practically worthless.

But that wasn't the only reason Lawrence had chosen this stall.

"You're right. You're probably the one all the locals come to, aren't you?"

The man smiled proudly in response. He valued coins as much as the next profit-seeker, but he had a gambler's personality.

"So what's the most trusted coin around here?"

Currencies were the lifeblood of commerce, and the more one flowed, the better. A merchant usually had no choice but to accept payment in whatever currency a customer had with them, but if it was an untrusted currency they might refuse it. As such, knowing the most trusted coins was an important clue to knowing how the web of commerce worked in a given town. It might even give away whether Diva really planned to go to war, and who they would attack.

Furthermore, if they were defending this town like a rare flowering plant, then the exchange rates were just as informative. Lawrence needed to know if they planned to wage war or not. And not just for Holo, but for the sake of opening his own shop. He couldn't very well open a shop and accept coinage no one else in town would accept.

"Trenni silvers."

The man replied as if it was a fact that meant nothing to him. Trenni were chiefly used in the south, so did that mean Diva really was going to wage war on the northern states?

"Haha! If *that's* so surprising to ya, then you obviously don't know the rate for Lumiones around here."

"..Huh? Lumiones?"

Those were the most powerful coins in the world right now. They were accepted by exchangers anytime, anywhere. No one refused them. Lumione was just that glorious of a country, and their coins were bright and weighed so much it was obvious how pure they were. Even children knew that.

The exchange rate of a currency indicated how powerful it was. The more widely it circulated, and the more in demand it was, the higher the rate. Yet even in a land flooded with tens of powerful currencies, Lumione coins seemed genuinely blessed by God at how consistently valued they were.

If a war was really going to be waged, the price of goods would climb due to shortages of supply, and the exchange rates of currencies would decrease correspondingly. But a Lumione coin was still gold, even if it was melted down. Its value would change very little even in times of war.

Based on all of this, Lawrence intentionally chose an extreme exaggeration.

“Forty Trenni silvers.”

“Twenty seven.”

“Ha! Ha..”

Lawrence started laughing, but quickly stopped with an “ah.”

“Twenty seven. Just not here. You have to go to the exchange for gold coins managed by Diva company. If you plop down twenty seven Trenni there, they’ll hand you a Lumione.”

The man smiled and stared at Lawrence, who was stunned.

“I mean, where do you think you are? This place is run by Diva, who run the biggest mines in the world. We might not have gold in these mountains, but lots of silver, copper and tin. So since everyone in the south pays us in Lumione, they get cheaper.”

Gold coins.. were cheap. Lawrence had *never* heard that in his life. His first instinct was to assume the man was lying, but when he looked over at Holo, her head was tilted in confusion.

“Wow, twenty seven..”

“Haven’t-cha been to the market? Just buy something there. You’ll see just how different we are here.”

Indeed, Lawrence had just purchased something at the stalls in the square; fried bread for Holo. He was preoccupied, so he had paid without paying attention, but he should have: the currency he was most familiar with was being used here as though it was natural.

“Most merchants who visit here react the same way. I mean, just head to the market now and buy something. You were probably told that Pulaz coppers were the best coins to use here, yeah? Well that kind of rough stuff won’t please anyone here. You’ll be charged through the teeth.”

True, that jogged Lawrence’s memory of paying in copper coins at a stall and earning a look of contempt from the shopkeeper. He ended up paying more than he normally should have.

“We all want finer coins here, even the ones from the south. Some even call this place an exclave of the southern states. It’s just not a widely-known fact.”

A wave of dizziness hit Lawrence. He’d intentionally stepped into what should have been a den of snakes, but instead it was a cache of gold.

“So young lady, if you’re after any gold jewelry, get ‘im to buy it for you right here.”

He completely ignored the stunned Lawrence and talked to Holo, who gasped and clutched Lawrence’s arm.

“Well there ya have it. Five Lute’s worth of information. You have my thanks.”

The man pocketed the coins with a huge grin.

Lawrence was speechless as he and Holo walked away. Twenty seven Trenni for a Lumione? The fact kept circling around his mind to the point where he was disoriented. He couldn’t even walk straight.

“Hey, you.”

Holo’s voice snapped him out of it. When he looked at her, he saw a gentle smile that he rarely got to see.

“Are you trying to get in trouble again?”

Was she joking, being sarcastic, being honest, or just toying with him? Or maybe all four? He’d confirmed one thing on their trip together: business was simple, it’s humans that are complicated. Yet he was so simple Holo could run circles around him.

“..No..”

“Then please do what you should, before you vanish inside that head of yours again.”

Her smile made him nod and immediately reply.

“Oh, but if I have to get in trouble, I’d rather it be a small quarrel with you.”

Her ears shifted under her hood.

“You are getting more and more clever.”

She would probably sigh in satisfaction if he hugged her now.

Even if Diva was trying to hide a desire to go to war, they wouldn’t be able to keep prices steady if they hoarded food and other goods before a war. That, and if they relied on one currency and it weakened after a war, they would be in serious trouble. So relying on both Trenni and Lumione coins was a sure sign they were hostile to the north, since both were powerful, and the ruler portrayed on them was a foreigner. It made sense for them to go with foreign currency if they had a dispute with the north, but it wasn’t enough evidence to be certain that

war was their aim.

“Ugh, if that is your explanation, then I am lost. You, why were you so excited just now? Did you realize what the company is up to?”

“No, no.”

She really was lost. Right now, she couldn’t see why Lawrence would react the way he did.

“Listen..”

So he told her.

“Exchange rates aren’t the same everywhere, and certain coins aren’t accepted by everyone. Stable currencies are rare, and the strongest of them is the Lumione. Once foreign merchants discover the low rates here, it’ll be huge news.”

“But no one here is nervous about that.”

She said that almost dismissively, like an impatient girl. He felt hurt at having his serious explanation treated that way.

“Not everyone’s a merchant.”

Seeing him reply under his breath like that made her smile at him like she did to children.

“Hey you, do not get angry. Well? I do want to hear more.”

He knew she was humoring him, but it made him feel a bit better to hear her say she wanted to know more about his profession.. at least until he realized just how simple and transparent that kind of reaction was.

“..well, the merchants who figure this out will want to keep it quiet. Anyone can see that they should just shut up and keep earning while they can.”

They weren’t hiding the exchange rates, though they were hardly letting everyone in on how lucrative such a situation was. It would be the observant and the fortunate who would earn from this.

“And how would one earn from this?”

Holo peeked at the stalls as she talked to him. Even though it looked like she was just doing this to cheer him up, he knew that there was no real reason to get upset about that.

“There’s two ways.”

“Oh?”

“First, buy goods here.”

“Buy.. goods?”

They were talking in the market, surrounded by simple-looking stalls that were made of little more than wood and linen. They were still building the town, after all, and that would include the shops. Of course, merchants might have also opted to just open these kinds of shops anyway, because it was less of a risk. A stall could be written off anytime, even a fire wasn't going to be much of a setback.

“Yes. See? Everything's so cheap it's unbelievable.”

He wondered if this is how a thief would feel if they saw an unguarded treasure. In his eyes, all the goods on display in town were shining like they were made of gold.

“They're all new, too, right from the workshop. See? This is such a nice knife, but it's only one and a half Trenni. Even the handle looks nice. Iron is cheap here, and so is the wood to keep the bellows going. Look, even these buckets are huge and so well-crafted they fit cleanly into one another. They probably wouldn't even dent if I kicked them.. that's solid workmanship.. and a third of a Trenni for three of them. Guilds everywhere would be angry to see these kinds of prices. Jeez, even if I just ship these pigskin mats to Lenos, then..”

His hand shot under his chin as he calculated. Holo had no recourse but to poke him with her elbow. He coughed to clear his head, just happy he had a legitimate excuse.

“I didn't expect that the goods here would be this cheap. Just buy them low, and selling them high elsewhere. Pretty simple, yes?”

“Yes, I see. That is so simple it could actually work.”

“..however, there's an even simpler way. More profitable too, probably.”

She eyed him suspiciously. His ventures into “more profitable” business had all been failures, so he couldn't blame her, but this was a chance that he wouldn't pass on.

“Rather than buying goods, just buy the currency directly.”

Her suspicion only increased.. he wondered if she would ever get used to currencies.

“It's just twenty seven Trenni per Lumione here, right? So if we stock up on them, then take them back to Lenos or Gerube, we'll get thirty five Trenni per Lumione. We'd end up making an extra 8 silvers, and we could repeat it.”

Holo's amber eyes narrowed in understanding, then closed in thought. They reopened while she looked elsewhere, but then soon turned back on him in doubt.

"If what you say is true, then everyone should be doing this."

He nodded and replied immediately.

"Yes, they should."

Her eyebrow raised, she rolled her eyes and spoke in an icy tone.

"Then if I am right, and everyone does this, the gold coins will start off less expensive, and silver coins more expensive. But then will it not happen that there will be fewer gold coins, and more silver ones over time? The rates should stabilize quite soon."

Even with just the barest of information, her mind could extrapolate the rest. When he nodded, she hummed with pride.

"Exactly, and that's why I'm so excited. In fact, I'm really anxious."

"You want to make some money before the prices stabilize?"

He wasn't sure if he should nod or not, but ended up doing so anyway. Then it was Holo's turn to not know how to react. It made sense for her to be nervous given how little self-control he had when he saw a chance to profit. Still, the difference in value for silver coins in Lesco compared to Gerube was almost thirty percent. It was a tremendous profit, and Lawrence could be rich in no time.

This was just as important when it came to opening a shop. Once the exchange rate stabilized, a shop he paid twelve hundred Trenni to open would effectively be worth fifteen hundred Trenni in the end. The more money he invested now, the greater his eventual return, all because of how stable gold was in backing the economy. Three hundred Trenni.. earning that kind of money wasn't easy for Lawrence.

"You know, I really do not hate it when you get like this."

"If I could drop everything right now, I would take all the coins I could carry to the south."

She smiled, then sighed. That snapped him out it; it was clear that he was overly excited. Finding out about Diva company was their real goal here, not making money. He coughed, and tried to steer the conversation back to Diva, but she just stared off into space like she wasn't listening.

"You haven't thought of something strange about this, have you?"

She wasn't a businesswoman, but she was cleverer than he was. Being an outsider also had its advantages when it came to understanding such situations. That said, she couldn't quite explain what was bothering her.

"Well.. I just have a strange feeling about it."

"Strange feeling? How so?"

"Um, well.. I am not sure.."

She bit her lip and whined like it was bothering her, almost like she felt ill. Other bystanders were watching her with curiosity. Lawrence was unknown here, but they would surely remember his face now that they saw him with such a beautiful girl. He wanted to whisper to her that they ought to leave.

"I got it!"

She practically clucked like a chicken laying an egg, only to have her mouth covered by his hand.

"Pipe down."

They made their way to the center of the market, which was filled with chairs made of roughly-hewn wood. They were there for a shop, but were just placed there so people could take a rest. Lots of people were happily chatting away here, and now Holo and Lawrence were as well.

"So?"

Holo puffed proudly at his question.

"How can you dare call yourself a merchant, if you could not discover this?"

"..Give me a break."

"Well, I *am* the Wisewolf after all. It is obvious that there is a flaw in this method."

She shone with confidence, and her mention that it was "obvious" piqued his interest. What did she mean? She smiled as he pulled in closer to listen.

"If there was no flaw, why would the company not do it as well?"

"..Huh?"

"According to that spirited moneychanger, gold coins are cheap because Diva receives gold coins in exchange for what they mine from the mountains, yes?"

“Yes.”

“But then why would they not just do this by themselves? ’Tis strange.”

Lawrence began saying “That’s because,” but found himself caught off guard.

“They have gold coins, so they could just move them to the other towns. They could exchange them for silver themselves, but they clearly do not think this is the best way to profit in this situation.”

That sounded perfectly reasonable, but Lawrence wasn’t quite convinced. There was still something strange.. the exchange rate for Trenni silver was odd, but it was already much more stable than it must have started off. And it wasn’t just the exchange rate that was bothering him. He also felt something eating away at the back of his mind.

“No, there has to be more to it.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure, but that still doesn’t add up. Why not?”

His hand supported his face as he thought it over again. This town was full of Lumione earned by Diva company. Gold coins were inconvenient for purchasing small items, so people would exchange them for other currencies based on silver or copper. Scarcer items would increase in price, so those coins would be worth more. It therefore made some sense that a gold coin would only be worth twenty seven silver ones here. That checked out.

That meant one could earn from this situation. Buy gold coins here, and exchange them for silver elsewhere. Repeat, and the profits roll in. It was trivial, and any traveling merchant would jump at the chance. So then why didn’t Diva company do it? All they had to do was exchange their gold coins elsewhere on their own, and they’d make a killing. Especially since almost all of the gold coins in town were from Diva’s earnings to begin with. They could cut out the middleman, so why didn’t they? Holo was right about that.

If one Lumione was worth twenty seven Trenni here, and was worth eight more Trenni elsewhere, that meant they didn’t want to do the job themselves. They would just compensate others for having to do it by offering their Lumione at a discount that made it worthwhile for others to do it on their own. But then.. how could it possibly be necessary for them to make the discount eight Trenni silver? This truly was odd, there had to be a catch.

“They *must* have a reason.”

But what was their reason? They wouldn’t need to do this much just to start a war. Maybe

they'd heard that the coins were going to be collected and re-minted, like the time when he and Holo just met? If that was true, then this place was even more abnormal. If Trenni coins were involved in something this big, then he would have heard rumors in the south already.

Plus, Lesco was so peaceful and lively; clearly exchange rates weren't affecting daily trade here. If Diva company was guaranteeing a Lumione for every twenty seven Trenni, then why should Lawrence have to rush to exchange? Gold coins just weren't that useful in daily life, so he might as well do some trading first and gather more Trenni to exchange for Lumione.

Even if there was an exchange rate difference between towns to cash in on, only a big company or traveling merchant could probably capitalize on it. Town merchants couldn't afford to close up shop for this chance, and craftsmen were probably still unaware of it. Farmers wouldn't have a clue, since they only ever cared about the market for their produce or cattle.

Lawrence just couldn't figure out why Diva would maintain this low exchange rate if they would be taking a loss. What was the point? They had even hired mercenaries, and were paying twenty Lumione a day to keep them here. That was a lot of money. What was their aim? Were they just so rich they no longer had to care about such things?

There was clearly something more to this, but it was beyond him. Why would you keep such a low exchange rate at your own loss?

"Holo, what do you think?"

He finally noticed something as he asked her that question.

"What do I think about what?"

He had been lost in his own thoughts, so of course she wouldn't have a clue what he meant. And yet, she was smiling at him when he looked up. She even sounded happy.

"I finally occupy some space in your heart."

He was dumbfounded. It took him several seconds to realize what she meant. He had instinctively asked her what she thought, rather than walling himself off and thinking on his own as he usually did.

"Speaking of which, would you like to know what you have been saying to yourself?"

"What?!"

He immediately looked around him, knowing that he couldn't take back anything he'd said. She laughed at his feckless reaction, but then she continued.

"'Twas but a joke. Hmm. There are still so many things I do not understand, but I believe I see

the theoretical problem. It seems there are many principles of the world that will never change no matter how long I live.”

Her smile was arrogant, but still lovely. “Confident and gorgeous” would probably be a better description. He could see her fangs poking over her alluring lips, and her eyes were squinted so tightly they looked more like the scar left behind after being slashed by a knife.

Lesco, or at least the Diva company, seemed to making a lot of odd choices. At least one of those choices seemed devious.

“The workers in that company probably aren’t good people.”

He sank in his chair and looked around at the lively town surrounding them. It was like heaven for a merchant or craftsman, but as the Bible said, it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a person like Lawrence to pass through the gates of heaven.

“If a magician has a chicken lay a blue egg, ’tis the work of the magician and not the chicken.”

“How about golden eggs, I wonder..”

A traveling merchant could hardly stop a war, but preventing one wasn’t quite the same thing. If the machine leading to war was wobbly, they could destroy it. After all, even ants could destroy a dam. The situation right now was indeed similar to the fiasco that happened when he’d just met Holo. Attention hadn’t been paid to the details, so now everyone was in trouble.

“I feel..”

“Hmm?”

As he wondered about this, Holo pushed her palms against her knees as though preparing to stand up.

“As though we have not thought back on what happened shortly after we met.”

He stared at the happily smiling girl and reached his hand out to her. She tilted her head and pulled his hand. He had to force himself to not wrap his arms around her.

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Lawrence suspected they had determined what Diva company was up to, but because it might have been a coincidence, they returned to the market to investigate. Whenever two distant towns traded, they would base prices on the Lumione gold coin. The exchange rates might vary, but it was still easier to calculate things this way.

If gold coins were so inexpensive, then southern towns like Gerube should be frequenting the

shops here. They always used Lumione coins, after all, so they should be taking advantage of their low price. So why weren't they?

"Who comes to trade? Everyone. Well, not everyone.. those who don't mind coming to a place run by a mining firm. Lots of people from the Dolan Plains way up north, and Vashal in the far east. It'd be tougher for them to stay put then to come to the mountains and sell all their wares."

That was what a grocer said. His shop had all kinds of products on display, ones rarely seen in places south of Lenos. Dried fruit, pickled vegetables, chicken and rabbit meat, fox and wolf fur, and even ironware.

No matter if someone was just trying to sell wares in a tiny shop, or they were doing business in an unrestricted market, they were still a "northerner." Even this grocer was from a village deep in the mountains.

No one in the north cared that Lesco was using a southern currency. Such things as where a currency was issued didn't matter to them, only that it was a viable currency. Because of that, Lesco was able to procure all sorts of goods from the north.

"Hmm.."

The sun was beginning to set when they finished their rounds. Lawrence sat on a chair, deep in thought. Diva company was the only thing that connected Lesco to the south.

Lesco mostly traded with the north, and just sold crops that came from the south. Everything else was basically from the north. Local craftsmen made everything from the basic necessities to the luxuries. Not one person believed a war would begin.

The town's business was set up in a rather cozy manner. With an exchange rate so beneficial for buyers, everything sold well. Of course, that was unfavorable for sellers, but they had little choice if they wanted to do business. Because of this, lots of people came to town and a nice selection of products became available.

Products were all sold, craftsmen kept buying more raw materials, and the whole operation ran smoothly. True to Moid's word, the town's rapid growth was fueled by "freedom." What a horrible joke.. nobody could tell it was all just Diva Company's ploy.

Lawrence could tell something was amiss from how suspiciously smooth everything ran. Something *had* to be. All these mercenaries in town, yet no one believed a war was brewing? It was just too strange, and something far out of Lawrence's experience.

"You don't want to head back to the inn?"

He looked up at Holo, who was rubbing her calves. It finally dawned on him just how long they'd been walking; her cloak was covered in dust.

“Oh~hoh.. indeed, we do not want to walk around forever, like stupid dogs.”

Lawrence had always relied on his legs to gather information, to the point where he basically thought with his feet. Unfortunately, he wasn't walking alone anymore.

“After all, I am the Wisewolf. Slow thinking suits me better than endless walking.”

“As long as there's wine in your hands?”

Holo stood up as he stooped down, looking a bit irate.

“I may not be as sharp as you in business, but it still interests me.”

Was she just saying that to show her care again? Lawrence wasn't sure, but Holo wasn't paying attention to him anyway. She just kept talking.

“For example, I am more accustomed to puzzling over the whole, rather than playing with the little pieces until they fit.”

“True, once you sink your fangs into something, you never let go.”

She smiled and kicked his shin.

“The interesting pieces stand out more as I view the whole.”

“..And what interesting piece do you see now?”

He rubbed his legs as he asked, knowing from her expression that she wasn't joking around.

“When you spoke of currencies, my thoughts drifted to that island.”

“Oh, you mean the Winfield Kingdom?”

Winfield was an important producer of wool, but their economy was nearing collapse because of poor decisions from their king. Holo nodded.

“Why is this town not in the same position as that place?”

“What do you mean?”

He was confused, but she didn't laugh at him. She was serious.

“Just now, as we wandered around the market, I noticed that everyone smelled of soil and wood. They were all from the mountains and forests, meaning they would not come here often. That made me imagine this place being much like that island kingdom.”

Someone as sharp as Holo wouldn't like spelling out their conclusion after an analysis. It made Lawrence feel like he was being tested, but he remained patient.

“So.. then.. ah! You mean they'll sell their goods and take the money home.”

“Yes. That money should be gold or silver, but in this case I would expect them to ask for silver.”

Lumione gold coins depreciated less than the others, and fewer needed to be carried around. But silver coins would depreciate more quickly here, so people could get more of them to take home. This was similar to what Lawrence had experienced on his first adventure with Holo. It was so much more convenient to shop here with gold coins that people would give the silver ones away, not even bothering to properly exchange them. Lawrence hummed at this realization.

“That means the silver coins will all leave town eventually, and they'll run the risk of ending up coinless, like Winfield.”

“Exactly. Just like that island where we could stuff our bellies with food with but a lone coin.”

Was she mentioning food because she was hungry after all of that walking?

“But that doesn't seem like it should happen here.. even with these exchange rates. At the very least, they're far from having insufficient coinage now, so..”

“Of course, some people will be bringing back large amounts of silver coins.”

“Right.. Lenos has a lot of them right now, after all.. and probably all because of what's going on here..”

Both cities were on the Roef river, so a sharp businessman would have bought them up, while others would just trade for them during the fur riots. After all, it was hardly novel for a coin to become scarce when exchange rates were so favorable. Lenos was already in the same boat as Winfield, and didn't have enough coins for small change.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“With all of this silver here, will they make their own money?”

Lawrence puzzled over it for a moment, but quickly came to the conclusion that it wasn't

feasible.

“They’d need more than just the workers and hammers, they’d need the moulds for the coins being minted. Basically, they put a blank coin in the mould and hammer it so the image is imprinted on it. The craftsmen who make those moulds are all kept close to their kings, and making fakes is tantamount to declaring war. War with a country strong enough to make their own coins, like Trenni. Not to mention that-”

“Time leaves its mark on coins. From the amount of rust and wear, people will know that a coin is new. It would be impossible to hide that fact.”

Holo stopped eyeing the coin in her hand and looked up at Lawrence before continuing.

“After all, one cannot hide their simple-mindedness by simply acting mature.”

Lawrence’s face twitched, but he kept his composure and replied.

“Indeed. If they try too hard, they might be passed over by the one who likes them as they are.”

He said that to turn her tease back around on her, but she flashed him a shameless smile. Well, whatever.. as long as she was happy.

“It seems that someone has been bringing coins into town in secret.”

Lawrence was curious about there being such a large number of coins moving. Were there actually that many coins? No one could estimate just how many were actually moving in and out of town in a day, but given the differences in exchange rates between the town, enough people might actually be gaming the system for it all to work.

The answer to this riddle seemed to be just around the next corner. What was it? It was right on the tip of his tongue. He turned his head to look around, and finally noticed just how lost in thought he was.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

It was rather late. The food stalls were beginning to sell full course dinners, and Holo was struggling to tear her eyes away from them and back to Lawrence.

“What’s your impression of Diva company?”

“Well..”

“Uh, wait.. what I mean is, what *did* you think about this town, back when we first heard about

Diva company?”

Holo seemed confounded by his question, but still thought it through and gave him a reply.

“I thought as you did. That dancing girl we met during our boat trip told me that everyone here thinks only about money, and that people should not be that way or some-such.

“Yeah, but she was talking about the town where the actual mines are, wasn’t she?”

“I believe so, but I did not know that at the time. Back then I could not have imagined this kind of atmosphere would exist. That, and no one had any information to offer us in the other towns.”

Lawrence nodded.

“That’s what I thought..”

“What?”

“I keep suspecting that I must have missed something, or that I’m just losing my touch and that I’m completely misunderstanding this place.”

“Oh?”

“But I’m wrong. If even you haven’t heard about this, then it’s not just me.. things are even stranger than I guessed. Things just don’t add up here.. it’s not the flow of coins.. not the number of coins.. it’s something more fundamental.. wait, no, maybe the shipping of silver coins?”

They had finally arrived at their inn while Lawrence tried to organize his thoughts. They could see candlelight through a crack in the column holding up the eaves. That smart teenage worker was sweeping the entrance of the manger. Another day was turning to dusk, and he was feeling tired.

His was a world weaved from many products, where the threads could intersect or run parallel to each other. It could be overwhelming. With such complicated threading, a complicated tapestry was formed.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

Once more he spoke to Holo, who looked back up at him. It was usually the other way around; he hoped that it would be like this more often in the future. But he wasn’t so stupid as to speak only to hear her reaction. He was just puzzled for a moment, trying to put his thought into

words.

“You know me.. my curiosity was piqued the moment I noticed something was odd.”

One of her eyebrows raised, along with one corner of her mouth.

“I do not need such an introduction.”

He was being upfront and honest because he wanted to make sure he was being clear. He couldn't resist looking around to make sure he wouldn't embarrass himself, but then he looked Holo in the eyes.

“I just think you'll be unhappy to hear this.”

Holo stared back into his eyes.

“Oh?”

“But if we can deduce Diva's plans, and they don't threaten Yoitsu or the north, then maybe I really *can* fulfil my lifelong dream and open a shop here.”

He was trying to look serious as he made his statement. Holo frowned, then smiled. Maybe he looked too funny to be angry at him.

“And?”

His eyes remained glued on hers. His mind wandered momentarily, comparing their color to the best candlelight Lesco had to offer, and found them superior. He had to answer her question, but it didn't feel like it would be easy to do so. He took a deep breath.

“I don't want to earn your hate, but I can't stop being myself.”

She also breathed in, and flashed him a fang-filled smile.

“I see. But I still have no clue what you are on about.”

She took his hand and walked into the inn beside him. Upon entering, they found it crammed with mercenaries and the waitresses from other shops who had been called in to busily serve them. Myuri and Moid sat at one end of the bar, with two other people next to them. Everyone else was quietly eating at the tables.

Myuri seemed to noticed Lawrence's gaze, and raised his glass in greeting. Lawrence couldn't disturb the silence, so he raised his hand in reply, following the town's custom. Myuri pointed at a table, and Lawrence nodded after looking at Holo for a moment. He entered the bar with his hand on her back like a proper gentleman, but spoke otherwise.

“Don’t drink too much. Silver coins don’t just fall out of trees, so either Diva is hiding something or someone else is. Maybe both.”

He then patted her back, as though encouraging her to not be nervous in front of Myuri and all of the other mercenaries. It was a tricky situation. There weren’t many here who could make a move against Diva company, so if someone *was* doing something in secret they were probably at odds with the company. Holo gave a confident nod.

“I see.”

They were soon seated at a table with the two mercenaries.

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Chapter 4

“Oh, you walked around town? Did you see anything interesting?”

Myuri was being quite respectful around Holo.

“Oh, indeed.”

Their cutlery was made of silver. They even had those rare trident-like utensils that southern nobles were said to use.

“We have our suppliers, but calling them merchants might be a bit of a stretch. Take Moid here.. a good planner, but hardly one for business.”

“Coins are too small for my hands.”

“That’s why I ask. For some reason we rarely get to have friendly chats with merchants.”

Mercenary groups like theirs were often painted in legends like swarms of locusts stripping the land bare. Of course it would be rare for them to share a meal and chat with someone like Lawrence; they *should* find it odd. After all, their “chats” with merchants generally amounted to threatening them or letting them choose the way they wanted to die.

Well, that might be exaggerating a bit. But it certainly was a rare opportunity for them to chat with a merchant who wasn’t normally associated with mercenaries, like Flynn or Delink company. They had to keep their reputation as fearful as possible, after all, or they would be taken lightly by their enemies. It was quite a conundrum.

“Well, I highly doubt I’ll have anything to say that’s worth your while.”

Lawrence smiled as he replied, setting down the loaf of bread he had just broken.

“I mean, the things that catch my eye are just buildings being sold cheaply and the like.”

“Ah, yes. One of my reports said that Mr. Lawrence and Ms.. Miss Holo were staring at a shop that’s for sale..”

Holo smiled and stared at Myuri. She knew he was struggling to figure out how to refer to her.

“Oh, you guys saw that? I must have looked pretty pathetic.”

“Don’t say that. There are those even among us who spend the later part of our lives working. We share the same dream, after all, of earning enough to live comfortably in a town

somewhere.”

Myuri was trying to give the impression he wasn't spying on them. He motioned with his eyes to Moid, who carved the meat. In a flash, Holo's plate was empty no longer.

“But is it really *that* cheap?”

It seemed that Myuri's talents weren't limited to the killing arts.

“Oh my, yes. And that's on top of there being no troublemaking companies or guilds here.”

“Right.. some of my men are even thinking of settling down here. Not all of them are young and free of scars.”

Myuri's eyes surveyed the room like a king staring at his subjects from his castle. His band did have a long history, so it made sense for them to have warriors of age and experience. They weren't a new band with a single conflict under their belt. With a history like theirs, of course some of their members would settle down in towns. The band could benefit from having old members supporting them in many places.

“And no one here cares about their past, which is even better.”

No disputing companies, no guilds, little regulation.. this was hardly a place that could be called a proper “town.”

“True, I think the money situation's even better.”

The moment Lawrence mentioned money, all eyes were on him. For those who bloodied their hands for money, such a mention warranted their undivided attention.

“What do you mean?”

“Markets and currencies are driven by the whims of God. It's just the way it is. So imagine my surprise when things aren't the same here.”

Myuri stabbed his trident-shaped utensil into a chunk of meat before shifting his gaze from Lawrence to Moid. However, Lawrence trusted in Holo's ability to divine what everyone was thinking just from their eyes, so he remained focused on his speech.

“Of course, things only look that way.. it's really because everyone's scrambling to maximize their own profits.”

They nodded; mercenaries were the kind of people who knew full-well how this sort of thing worked, since they had to predict the movements of their enemies and the landlords who hired them. Lawrence pressed on.

“Even if the exchange rates for money in this town are surprisingly low because God’s in a good mood or something, he’s not going to do everything for us.”

Lawrence was ready to shut himself up the moment someone spoke up against him, but they were all attentively listening to him. If they were wolves, their ears would all be eagerly turned his way.

“By that, I mean the money market’s quite tendentious. Coins, more precisely Trenni silvers, may seem to be naturally flowing here, but when you look at it from a broader perspective..”

Myuri shot up from his chair, looking very much like his own spiked hair (did he use egg whites to keep it up like that?)

“I see.. someone’s been moving money in..”

“Yes. But when this sort of thing happens, someone’s bound to notice. That’s what confuses me.. I just can’t figure out how the money’s flowing in this place.”

Lawrence had reached a point in his theory where it verged on becoming substantial. Not a single piece of cutlery was in anyone’s hand.

“?”

All eyes were on Lawrence, anticipating his conclusion. Had this been a bargaining session he would have been the one making off like a bandit.

“No one in Lenos seems to know much about this place, which means few people are traveling between.”

Even if people kept their mouths shut about Lesco itself, they couldn’t really hide the fact that they were going there. The moment people found out, they’d become naturally interested. They couldn’t all lie about it; keeping so many stories straight would be impossible.

In fact it wasn’t even about misinformation, but rather that there was *no* information. No one was keeping secrets, they just weren’t traveling between towns. Lawrence had noticed just how barren the roads were on the way to Lesco. Those heading north from Gerube wouldn’t be taking boats, but walking along hills. Lesco was hardly hidden from view, so it was just too strange that no one knew about it.

“At first I thought that things just recently became like this, but after I strolled around the market today I realized I was wrong. It’s like everyone from the north comes here to gather up Trenni silvers. They’re such a trusted currency, after all, so they’re valuable. Northern folk will snatch them all up and take them back home. But then, there has to be an inflow of Trenni to

compensate for that, or this place'll end up like the Winfield Kingdom. Everyone'll grab all the coins they can and flee like rats from a sinking ship."

You could hear a pin drop in the room now; the air was eerily tense. No one was communicating, not even with their eyes. Even Myuri was hanging on Lawrence's words. It was encouraging.

"I have to believe that Diva's bringing the cash back in, otherwise someone would have been spotted bringing it in by now. And they're also keeping the exchange rates the same, which is a big mystery unless you look at it that way."

"So you think they're secretly smuggling in more coins?"

Myuri stared at Lawrence, almost in a threatening manner. He was cleverly cutting to the chase, making Lawrence rub his nose and sweep the bread crumbs off his lap before continuing.

"I'm just a merchant. I have no understanding of war. But there are only so many secrets out there that are worth exploring."

It seemed like a strange tangent to go on, but this was a strange crowd to entertain. Even if they weren't moving, they were exuding an air of challenge that could break one's will. It felt like being a rabbit cornered by a pack of dogs. Anyone would be cowed by that atmosphere. Had Holo not been with him, Lawrence wouldn't have the courage to stand up to them. Myuri finally stopped staring at him and broke the silence.

"So?"

He still wore a gentle smile as he lifted the meat he had stabbed earlier on his trident. It was a delicious dish of finely roasted beef, generously spiced. Dark on the outside, red and juicy on the inside. Myuri placed it into his mouth like it was his birthright to help himself to such dripping meat. He'd probably had even more bargaining experience.

"Traveling merchants like me dream of owning our own shop. We have to peek into every corner, and divine the secrets of every town trend to do so."

Anyone who came in at this point in the conversation would be totally lost. Myuri didn't shoot back with another question. It was likely that his band had already thought about this before Lawrence and Holo ever arrived, but had arrived at a simple conclusion. Coins were flowing out, but there was enough supply to sustain that.

Shipping coins wasn't easy, and there were plenty of people coming to Lesco who would notice. Unless one wanted to believe that goblins and elves were behind it, it had to be because someone was doing it in secret. That meant it was motivated by business. No one had to tell everyone where they were shipping things, so the conclusion was obvious.

“They can keep their secrets.”

Myuri wiped his mouth as he spoke. Now Lawrence *knew* he was right. Holo’s ear was subtly turned, obviously confirming the same thing. Myuri tapped his ear, making the tension in the room rise.

“Some secrets are meant to be kept. After all, they make the world go ’round.”

Moid looked up at Myuri, obviously surprised, but the grandfatherly figure of the group was dismissed by a simple wave of Myuri’s hand. That hand then pointed toward Holo, who had resumed eating her pidgeon pot pie.

“More wine, Moid.”

Moid nervously poured more wine into Holo’s glass. She hadn’t been drinking much, of course, since she was busily watching everyone’s reactions. They might only share the Myuri name and not the blood, but they still had the cunning and sharpness of a pack of wolves. It made Holo happy enough to politely drink half her glass out of respect.

“There are many people here, taking care of our needs. This inn has been kept busy every day just to keep us fed.”

Myuri’s voice seemed just as charred as the meat and pies he was sharing with his band. Lawrence detected that he was finally being asked to talk.

“And that’s not even counting all the shoes and other equipment they’ve got to maintain.”

Myuri’s reply was immediate.

“But if we enter town all at once, we’ll probably be treated like thieves.”

Lawrence then realized how the money was flowing, but he still wanted to know the reason. Why was Diva company doing all of this?

“Say, Mr. Lawrence..”

Myuri was cutting to the chase again.

“Let’s have some fine wine after dinner.”

He was of course saying that their present conversation was over, so Lawrence nodded and kept his reply short.

“Thanks.”

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Lawrence asked if he could be excused for a while, and Myuri didn't put up a fight. Lawrence was being permitted to talk with Holo, or avoid the downstairs atmosphere, if he wanted. He wasn't going to be backed into a corner and stabbed.

It was tough being in the den of such people, after all; they weren't really much different from beasts, albeit ones without sharp fangs or claws. But really, Lawrence only asked because he'd had a long day. The moment he entered his room, he plopped right into bed just like Holo.

"Well well, you really worked hard today."

She sat next to him as she took her shoes off. Her tail was more of a mess than usual, and smelled dusty.

"So it turns out they really are the ones bringing in the silvers, huh."

"Twould appear so. They may even be the ones spreading the rumors of war, perhaps."

"Oh?"

Her tail was making his nose itch, but he couldn't bring himself to move it when he saw her looking at him. That only made it wag happily, rubbing itself all over his face. He kept quiet until the so-called Wisewolf finally stopped out of boredom.

"Diva must have told the mercenaries here about the currency situation and hired them to smuggle in silvers. No thief is stupid enough to attack mercenaries, so they won't have any trouble. And they'd be the stupid ones if they told anyone about what they were really up to in Lesco, so it makes sense they would spread those rumors of a northern attack."

Holo nodded and lay herself down, placing her elbows on his belly to support her face.

"But what might their goal be?"

"Good question. If it was just to smuggle in silver, they could do it another way.. It's not too much of a stretch to think they're really out to spread the rumor."

Merchants weren't ones to take meaningless actions. Their principles ensured that all of their commercial behavior was results-oriented.

"If we assume Diva's really out to mess with the north, they'd have to call in some good knights and mercenaries that would be motivated to keep their secret. Others would follow soon enough, once people from the north came here and started spreading the rumors. That way they wouldn't have to spend very much to gather an army of knights and mercenaries."

The more of an army they gathered, the more people would think there really *\*was\** something going on, and come digging for the truth. Word of mouth would bring them there, and they would see for themselves just how splendid the town was. If no one came, they wouldn't sell any goods. But as things picked up, they could even hire traveling merchants to sell their wares to remote areas.

"But knights and mercenaries are useless outside of war.."

"They must have a use here, or they would not be here. It is just that simple."

Even if Holo insisted it was that simple, Lawrence couldn't quite figure it out. Simple things just weren't his forte.

"But maintaining this level of energy in town would be quite the challenge. Not to mention gathering all those knights and mercenaries like Myuri and keeping them paid. It can't be something all that trivial."

"Oh?"

"After all, this town's energy is a big performance."

Holo sniffed at his words, but he smiled and continued.

"Of course, that's not to say that they're acting."

"Diva supplies cash to the town by paying for the needs of the mercenaries. That should be how Myuri sees it. Obviously, Diva is trying to keep this town running smoothly by paying for goods and services. They could not allow this town to be laid to waste with a war, not when they have invested so much into it."

Gains and losses were not superficial things. Diva was keeping all of these soldiers in town and paying for them. That kept the northern folk coming back to sell their wares, and buying the works of the excellent craftsmen in Lesco. Everybody won. It was the best kind of way to develop a town.

But.. why build a town? Back when they'd first heard of Diva company, it was when they sought the bones of Holo's lupine compatriot. The mere thought that they were planning to abuse them to begin a war so enraged Lawrence that he was beyond forgiving them. Even if that first impression proved false, it wouldn't go away so easily.

Maybe he was struggling to figure out their goal precisely because he was seeing something so starkly different from what he'd expected. It was like his brain was chasing its own tail. The instant he came to that point, Holo gently smiled.

“Did you think of something?”

He’d forgotten that her elbows were on his belly, and received an angry swat from her tail for trying to sit up.

“No. I am just amused. Be it war or peace, all you think about is profit.”

Hearing that made him lose all motivation to sit up.

“Yeah.. landlords might start a war because of some age-old argument, but merchants only fight to protect their profits.”

“Protect them?”

He looked away at the wall as he replied.

“Mhm. There are just too many sad stories born from people’s desire to protect. Especially their homes.”

He turned back to face Holo, who was staring off into the distance from her perch on his belly.

“You’ve seen it in person, haven’t you? No one wants to leave, and their homes can’t be moved. No matter how terrible the storms, they just won’t go.. until all that’s left is tragedy.”

Merchants were scorned for the belief that they would run off with their wallets at the first sign of danger. Traveling merchants had it the worst, but they were people too. The more they wanted to protect a place, the less they wanted to move on. If danger struck, they would actually throw themselves into risk, even though they weren’t caught up in it. Just like Lawrence was with Pasloe, and why he met Holo. She again seemed to catch his thought, and poked him with her elbow with a sigh.

“So what you are saying is that the company running this town is planning something for the north and Yoitsu all for some stupid profit?”

She of course understood why, but the fact that she still asked her question proved just how painful it must be for her. Lawrence took a moment to consider which response was the most gentle.

“They don’t feel motivated by hatred, nor religious fervor. But I’m a merchant, I can’t help but be biased. I only see things in terms of profit and loss, and so if Diva plans to start a war I can only see one reason behind it.”

A tooth for a tooth. Strong belief would resist religious reformation, but if money was their motivation then things would turn out like they did in Pasloe. The people there had grown hostile toward Holo because they wanted to leave behind an old era for the profit of their

village. It was driven by anger, to be sure, and that was plenty motivation for their hostility.. but if Diva was starting a war purely for profit, Holo would feel utterly powerless.

“..fear, timidity, nervousness. It just feels ridiculous.”

“You felt it when we first entered town, didn’t you?”

Holo thought it over before nodding.

“And here I was, thinking that if there was no war or grief here, I’d finally found the place to open my shop.”

He spoke wistfully, like he’d woken up from a dream. It sure felt like that to him. Holo was worried about Diva’s plans, but she still found it in herself to smile at his joke. She slid her arms and placed her chin on his left shoulder.

“Then it is a good thing I am here with you, is it not?”

“You mean instead of hopping the short distance from Lesco to Yoitsu?”

If she missed her home, she could go back anytime she wanted.

“Yeah.. it really is a good thing.”

His honest response made her happily rub her face into his shoulder. It was a moment as lovely as pure glass. He’d always used his common sense to try to figure out what she wanted, which was why he’d failed so utterly in Lenos. This was just the kind of moment he wished could last forever, but he gently shifted his weight and slid out from under her. He then stood up, and rested his hand on her head.

“If it were up to me, I’d keep lying here all night, but someone has to get answers from Myuri.”

He groaned as he stretched, like he hoped his exhaustion would leave along with his regret for ruining this wonderful mood. Especially seeing Holo lying there looking back at him. All he could do was force a smile.

“Is something wrong?”

In response, Holo poked his hand off of her head and stood as well.

“Nothing.”

She was obviously lying, but he didn’t have the heart to ask why. He’d surely screwed up yet again. And yet, Holo stood there with her hand raised as though comforting him.

“Alright, let us stop talking about this.”

She turned away with a sigh, not angry, but obviously frustrated at her inability to do anything about the situation. He was afraid of doing anything, knowing how quick to anger she was at times like this, but after her long sigh ended she finally looked back at him. Her face was that of a mother who was weary from taking care of her child all day.

“We should investigate that company’s plan first.”

She smiled broadly, but it was tinged with exhaustion. Lawrence nodded hard, and matched her as best he could. She put her shoes back on, then nicely wrapped herself in her cloak and sash and raised her arms. He watched her tiny body stretch, but the situation was entirely beyond him. He expected her to turn around with a wrathful expression.

“Alright, get ready. Someone is on their way to fetch you.”

When she turned back, it wasn’t wrath on her face, but perhaps she was just concealing it like the tail under her cloak. He was utterly perplexed by her behavior, and all she could do was sigh and stare back.

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Just like how Holo and Lawrence had spoken with each other, Myuri had taken the time to confer with his men.

It wasn’t the same youth that came to fetch them, but one of the other young men who was sitting near them earlier. Given his appearance, he wasn’t much younger than Myuri.. at most five or six years younger than Lawrence. He had the keen eyes of someone trying to become the apprentice of a renowned master. Perhaps he might polish his skills and actually end up in such a high-paying position, if he survived long enough.

“If anything happens, remember that I am with you.”

That was all Holo quietly said as they left their room. If Diva didn’t want their silver-shipping secret to slip, then a mercenary like Myuri had to worry about what to do with this traveling merchant who was in on that secret. Oddly, the atmosphere in the room wasn’t tense at all when they arrived. Lawrence was still on his guard, knowing how quickly mercenaries could turn, but Holo seemed calm. It was clear from her eyes that she wasn’t acting.

“Please have a seat.”

The higher up you went in an inn, the shabbier the rooms. Thus, this room on the second floor was probably the best one in the inn. Yet it was oddly cluttered, and since the inn wasn’t a particularly luxurious one to begin with, the room wasn’t all that large. The extra chairs added

for Holo and Lawrence crowded things even more.

Moid flicked a colorful bottle with his fingernail as Myuri finished, and it rang out like a gold coin. They ate with silverware, and drank in glasses.. just like nobles. If that wasn't enough, they also drank a thick-headed liquor darker than the brown of Holo's tail, the nickname of which was "the essence of life."

"Blessings to the makers."

Having declared the proper toast for enjoying such a drink, Myuri raised his glass. All the others followed suit, including Lawrence, and took a sip from their glasses. Holo seemed distraught over the amount of liquor, but ended up choking when she downed half her glass in one draught.

"We rarely get to enjoy something this humbling."

Myuri himself had winced like his mouth was full of fire and swallowed hard with his eyes closed.

"The nobility mixes this with other drinks, but I consider it blasphemous to those who make it. Distilling liquor takes a great deal of effort, am I right?"

Lawrence knew little about distilling, but he knew how very expensive the equipment was. Not to mention the secret recipes and techniques that made each brewer's work distinct. Still, Myuri was hardly seeking agreement.

"Anyhow."

He took another sip and continued talking.

"We've decided to let you in on everything, Mr. Lawrence."

Lawrence didn't make the classic mistake of looking around to spot which exits he could dash to in a pinch. Myuri squinted at him, quite interested in his reaction.

"These two here with us will succeed Moid. I want them here to watch and learn."

The two youths immediately straightened their backs.

"All for such an ordinary traveling merchant as I?"

Myuri barely let Lawrence finish before he replied.

"It's people who talk like that who are the most intimidating."

“What Diva’s after is far more mysterious than anything I could ever offer.”

Just like that, they were already at it. Moid was already quietly refilling Myuri's light blue glass.

“Everything in this town was just as surprising to us. Oh, we were all curious, but none of us could figure it out, so we just let it slide. After all, why rock the boat if we’re being catered to like this? All of us were thinking things like, ‘It’s nice having money and partying every night,’ ‘What more can we ask for,’ and ‘We’re not hard-headed knights like Lance Ford, we won’t die without a little adventuring.’”

There he was again, mentioning another mythical knight. Myuri really did have a knack for embellishing his speeches in a way that would keep his men bold.

“A bigger band might see fit to toss a merchant out on his ass, but we’re hardly that high and mighty. We’ve got to take every chance we get, especially when it comes knocking on our door and already suspects that we’re shipping coins.”

He tilted his glass toward Lawrence, then downed it all in one gulp. It was such strong liquor that even Holo had to sip it, but Moid had no intention of slowing Myuri down. In fact, he was already pouring more into Myuri’s glass, without him even asking.

“I’ll bet you guys earned like the mightiest band, though?”

Lawrence considered talking modestly to balance out Myuri’s exaggerated manner, but he chose not to. Mercenaries treasured their fame, so acting too humbly around them might even backfire and be something of an insult. He finally understood why grandstanding nobles liked to eat with mercenaries, especially well-spoken ones. It was a surefire way for all involved to stroke their egos.

“Oh, indeed. Even more than we expected we would.”

“They must have been running pretty low on silvers, then?”

“Exactly. But not long afterward, several barons heard of the offer and offered their services as well. Things.. weren’t quite as smooth after that, but you can be sure those barons made a tidy profit.”

“Impressive.”

Lawrence smiled, making Myuri nod and cough before he continued.

“All jokes aside, I keep hearing that Diva’s earning way too much gold. It sure is annoying, especially since I also hear this place has no power that can stand up to them. Even the poorer southern lords are treated like slaves. I’m dissatisfied with it sometimes, but such things are

dictated by those who have the gold. It's what decides who wins the wars, after all, so if they really are out to attack the north it's practically a given who'll end up on top."

Even if they didn't know whether there would even be a war, the mercenaries still came here. There could only be one reason that drove them here, and only one reason they didn't leave before their members grew impatient or complacent.

"So Diva wants to become the lords of the region?"

"I think so. Even if they won't be recognized as actual lords, merchants will find a way to build their power so they practically are lords."

That was true, there was even a certain trade alliance with their own moon-and-shield flag and several battleships. Lawrence had seen their power first-hand in the Winfield kingdom.

"That's why most of us are still here. If we can take part in a war to conquer the north, we'll win riches like we can't imagine. Knights will rule the land, and we'll be their armies. At least it used to be that way in the old days, but now it's quite possible that Diva could only need us to keep their city running smoothly."

Given that they were dealing in expensive metals, Diva would treasure soldiers who could help them discover and defend new mines in the north, not to mention their trade routes. Lawrence was keenly aware of that; it was obvious. But Myuri wouldn't be treating Lawrence to such a fine drink if things were that straightforward.

"But you don't think they're out to start a war."

Myuri tapped his forehead as Lawrence said that, like it was some secret code. His voice took on a more sombre tone.

"I don't. We're not a big group, and we've survived all this time because we gather intelligence and make good predictions. But I have no idea what Diva's thinking or doing this time. In the end we're just their tools. But the moment they make a bad choice, their hired mercenaries may turn on them."

Mercenaries didn't think long and hard to earn their keep, like Lawrence did. They staked everything on their lives. Were they a pack of wolves, Lawrence would be but a lonely sheep.

"I don't even know how they plan to use us. They aren't moving themselves, and they still haven't placed most of their forces. Those barons I mentioned haven't even exposed their involvement yet, and that's one of the reasons. If they made a move now, they'd be crushed. So why are they taking their time when they've invested so much toward that goal? I really don't understand the minds of wealthy aristocrats and their charitable deeds, but Diva isn't a charity. A strong foe isn't the most fearsome thing about a war.."

Myuri took a sip of his liquor before continuing.

“..It's not understanding your own situation. I'll bet that's exactly how *you* feel, am I right, Mr. Lawrence?”

His eyes and tone made it clear that he wasn't just rambling drunkenly. The two men standing next to them against the wall kept glancing over at Lawrence.

“You are. I'm exactly the same way. Given the chance, I'd love to stay here and spread my roots. That's why I'm compelled to understand all of this.”

Myuri nodded, then ate some salted nuts. He didn't care to eat quietly. Moid took over the conversation.

“In our long history, we've brought many a merchant to tears. We're hired for money, and merchants are led by money. But usually, the money that hires us has a clear and simple flow to it, because it's difficult to move such vast funds illegitimately. That's why, Mr. Lawrence, we're willing to be open with you about this, and do whatever we can, assuming you'll help us solve this puzzle.”

They were willing to do whatever they could, and it didn't matter whether Lawrence was exemplary or had Holo as his companion. It was just the only way they could solve the problem objectively.

For his part, Lawrence was also keen on figuring it out; just what was Diva up to? If it meant he could buy that inexpensive shop and live stably in this place, his dream would finally be achieved. That was as important to him as helping ease Holo's worries about the north.

“Then I'll do my best to meet your expectations.”

It was a short and quick reply, since taking too long to think it over wouldn't go over well this time. Myuri leaned in over the table, while Moid and the other two sat back on the bench beside him, like they were trying to compensate. Lawrence continued.

“However, there's one thing about the flow of money here that I don't understand.”

“Which is?”

“Taxes.”

Taxes were an unpleasant, but necessary evil in order to keep a town running. But with no guild and no walls, Lawrence simply couldn't fathom how they could collect taxes. The answer astounded him.

“There are no taxes here.”

“Huh..?”

Lawrence swallowed the words he wanted to say: “how’s that possible?” Such a place would be a haven for the scorned and hated families of tax officials.

“No walls. There’s no way they can collect tariffs or tolls. You saw the market, right?”

Lawrence nodded.

“Well then, you know how simply the market is structured here. No one puts a lot out on display. Diva’s the top dog here, after all, and have to maintain order. But a company can’t issue taxes. That’s a king’s privilege. The second they declared a tax, they’d also be declaring war.”

Then how *did* they keep this place running so smoothly? Magic? Or the magic of money?

“I’ve thought about the tax situation.”

Moid coughed and interrupted.

“Diva took over this land almost two decades ago, and back then no one paid this place any mind.”

Every square inch of land on the world was owned by someone.

“Rumor has it that they bought this land very, very cheaply, but it’s clearly not cheap anymore. They’ve built and developed it so much that the town can basically run on its own, all just with rent money. The key point is that they sell the buildings, but not the land the buildings are on. That rent lets them keep things going.”

“And since this place is so bustling, even the buildings are appreciating in value.”

Myuri had chimed in. This reeked of slicing a garden up into pieces to sell them, but it was truly a great way to earn money if they could maintain order.

“After all, it’s far less work than proper taxation. No need to investigate one’s property and earnings, no need for inspections or worrying about people abusing the tax code, and this way people have no choice but to pay their dues because the land isn’t theirs to begin with.”

That also explained why they had to supply funds to keep this place so energetic; the capital of the town depended on the land and buildings. The more people were attracted, the more land and buildings needed to be developed. But while that all made sense, it didn’t answer the fundamental question.

What was Diva really up to? Why gather up knights, mercenaries, and even the support of barons? There had to be another reason behind it all. They had to have a goal that hadn't yet been discovered by Lawrence or anyone else. Lawrence was still stumped.

"That means the shop I saw earlier won't be around for very long, huh?"

"Not long at all, I'm afraid. It'll be sold by Ponds' company, who are basically a branch of Diva, so the ones they sell.."

"..Are the ones that are the least expensive."

The value of those buildings would skyrocket in such a rapidly-developing area.

"Even wealthy barons apparently have to jump through hoops to buy buildings here.. or maybe I should word it another way. This is a town that sells freedom and dreams, so some buildings are probably reserved for people just like you, Mr. Lawrence."

If Diva's council wanted to make a bid for lordship of the area, it would be important for them to do such things and draw in new blood. It would make people a bit suspicious at first, but as the city grew and prospered, such reservations would quickly fade. The fact that someone as wizened-looking as Moid was saying this lent it credence.

Lawrence also knew one other important fact: when something was so valued, it was easy to resell. He'd seen just how easy that was first-hand, during his conflict with Amati over Holo. If it wasn't rare and in demand, it would be ignored, but once demand rose the seller would be the one with all the cards.

If he bought a shop here, he would be under Diva's control. He was already caught up in their plans, since he wanted to open his shop here. It would be lovely to buy such an inexpensive shop in an unrestrictive town; so much so that his heart was soaring, especially considering just how lively it was here.

But Lawrence had learned his lesson on this trip with Holo, and he also knew there were things more important than his dreams. He stole a glance at Holo, who was quietly sipping her drink, then nervously turned and jumped back into the conversation with Moid.

"Then are the barons just.. being suckered by the town?"

"Maybe. There's a rumor to that effect."

Moid looked at Myuri, who seemed a bit drunk. His eyes were red, but he continued.

"Maybe.. after all, it takes a long time to rebuild a state after a war, so no baron is brave enough to start one. Naturally, they'd prefer to just live an extravagant life, like a southern

noble. So..”

He downed the rest of his glass and looked over at his young cohorts, but they just tipped over the bottle sadly to show the liquor was already gone.

“All gone? Ah, anyway, that’s why this place is spreading rumors of war. I was just as put off by it at first, but now that I know why they’re doing it, I’m quite impressed.”

In Lawrence’s experience, a town couldn’t call itself a town without a wall around it. Just for their independence, and to defend themselves from cruel rulers. Villages had no walls because they had no autonomy; everything was managed by the baron. They had no freedom. For a company to rule a place like this with freedom was a novel and attractive prospect. It would surely attract jealousy as well. And yet, they had no walls to defend themselves.

“You see, walls aren’t for keeping people out.”

Myuri quickly beckoned to his men for more wine, then hopped to his feet and took a few steps before continuing.

“They’re for keeping people in.”

“Oh!”

Holo finally broke her long-standing silence with a gasp of appreciation. Myuri bowed in gratitude and continued.

“But in a war, the gates will shut and the guards will patrol the day away. It’s impossible to get in or out. Being surrounded by walls means that the people inside are connected to each other. They can’t survive on their own, so they cooperate. If there isn’t a wall, though, they’ll all just flee when things get tough. Especially when they think they’re losing. Why protect a place without walls, when it’s bound to collapse? That’s why people like us are hired, to stand in the guard’s shadows.”

“Just in case some feckless coward comes back to retrieve something they forgot?”

Myuri’s face contorted at Holo’s joke, just like he knew he had the cards to back up his bet. He pointed at her in lieu of saying “exactly.”

“That’s why there’s no wall here. With one, people would band together, and Diva would be in trouble, with all that money being stored away. There are downsides to being well-defended. Of course, this way it’s easy to attack the town, and harder to defend it, but that just means that the people coming to attack will be robbers, not usurpers. And robbers would know that the real prize would be locked away in Diva company, and how tough it would be to run off with it. Anyone capable of that wouldn’t take such a risk, not without trying to break in from

the inside by working for Diva first. And once they did, they'd realize they were better off just really working for Diva."

Lawrence clapped.

"A fine deduction."

He liked Myuri's approach, but had his suspicions. That's why the smile on his face wasn't genuine.

"We mercenaries are all brave. Diva is not weaker than we are, and no simpleton could have come up with a scheme like this, so they've earned our respect."

"Ah, so that's why the town's so far from the mines.."

"Precisely. Because they have to defend the mines, and that attracts trouble. Once a mine's occupied, it won't be easy to conquer."

Myuri flashed the smile of an experienced warrior, but when he breathed out it stank of liquor. He stared at the ground for a moment before continuing with a look on his face like he'd just swallowed some sour wine.

"Diva's clearly put a lot of thought into this, so I have to assume they've got a bigger plan."

He put his hand on his forehead, and Moid immediately stood up. He seemed to know Myuri quite well. He grabbed Myuri just before he flopped forward onto the table, passing out.

"Well well, the young master's let himself go tonight.."

That was the first time Moid had referred to Myuri as "the young master." He spoke like a mother hen lovingly watching over her chick. After all, he knew how tough Myuri had to act in order to be accepted as their captain.

"That's basically all we know. Do you have any other questions? Or is that enough to get you started?"

He smiled, but it wasn't a smile of expectation. It was one to comfort Lawrence, and make it clear that he wasn't really expected to figure anything out. In fact, Moid had caught and lifted Myuri like a stumbling princess. The two youths made way for them, like they were used to seeing this sort of thing.

"I'm not even feeling it yet.."

"Of course not. If you did, our honor would suffer. We can't have that."

Contrary to his appearance, Moid was a smooth talker.

“Well, we’d best be off. Excuse us.”

“No problem. Thanks for everything.”

Moid shook his barely-free hand dismissively.

“No, we’re the ones who should be thanking you.”

Lawrence knew he’d said nothing constructive, but he saw such a guileless smile on Moid’s face - more like a farmer than a mercenary.

“We truly aren’t a big group, but we’re a valiant lot. It’s a lot of pressure on the young master, so I’m proud of his ability to handle the challenge of being our captain.”

Was it really alright? They were outsiders, and there were two up-and-comers as well.. but then maybe Lawrence had no reason to be concerned. After all, Myuri’s men obviously trusted him, and he didn’t let them down. There really wasn’t any need to worry about suppressing the knowledge of such a collapse.

“He actually wanted to become a merchant, but he was the only one who could succeed the name of Myuri.”

Now that was a story as old as time. Lawrence was lucky in a sense; he got to write his own story from scratch. He wouldn’t ever really know what it was like to have to continue an already-thick volume that preceded him. If he wanted to know, well, he could turn to Holo, but she was busy stroking Myuri’s head as Moid carried him past them, like a grandmother looking down on her grandchild.

“However, Mr. Lawrence, Ms. Holo.. you are the ones who are made to solve riddles. All we can do is borrow your wisdom. Even my young master respects you for that.”

He was talking to them quietly, perhaps hoping the two youths wouldn’t overhear. He smiled, and Holo smiled back. She knew that Myuri had been supporting Myuri’s legacy and name, and that Moid was supporting him in turn. Her smile saw the two of them off, but it was a lonely one.

“This is their age now.”

She spoke like a character on a page that was being turned, off to disappear forever. Lawrence put his hand on her head.

“It’s still yours too, you know.”

Her face turned to his and she calmly replied.

“True.”

Her cool tone upset him a little, but her face immediately became happy when she saw that, and she smacked his back.

“You are honest to a fault.”

He sighed and waved at Moid, then began the walk back to their room.

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Apparently, Holo hadn't had her fill yet. Or, perhaps, she just hadn't enjoyed the liquor they drank earlier. Either way, she was already drinking wine the moment the door to their room had closed. Lawrence wasn't interested in having more, so he just sat down at the desk.

“Just too strange..”

His elbows hit the desk and his face was soon buried in his hands. He sighed, unable to catch Diva's tail in his mind, though it felt like it was flicking him in the face. Even after hearing what Myuri and Moid had to say, things seemed just as complicated. After all, they earned enough money from mining to support a faraway town.

And one without a wall, at that. As a walled town grew, all sorts of problems emerged. Overpopulation, the stench of butchering and tanning bothering everyone, and so forth. All because of town walls. Chickens and pigs ran underfoot, trash lay everywhere, rent just kept increasing, and so forth.

Walls really could be quite a hassle. Some even joked that things would be better if the walls in their city were demolished. Diva company apparently took that line of thinking to its logical conclusion. Lawrence had never seen something like that in a town like this.

“Too damn strange.”

“Yes, 'tis quite strange.”

“Hmm.”

Holo nodded as she sipped her wine.

“And yet, they are self-sufficient and work hard to make their town prosper, so I feel there is nothing to worry about.”

Lawrence looked back in confusion, and watched Holo chew on some jerky like a greedy child.

“I mean, I did not leave Pasloe for quite some time. They had no suitable leader, for starters, but really.. I just did not wish to leave.”

“Why not?”

“Hmm.. how should I put this? After working so hard to turn those poor fields into bountiful oceans of gold, how could I just leave them? From what we have just heard, the company here has done much the same to build this town, using their wisdom and good fortune.”

That was certainly true. Lawrence nodded, and so did Holo. He replied.

“If that’s the case, why would they put this place in a such a dangerous position?”

As Myuri had said, if a war broke out in a town with no walls, everyone would simply flee. But it was still not enough of an argument to justify the decision to Lawrence.

“Well, perhaps they are not? After all, they have gathered mercenaries to stave off any such threat, have they not?”

“..Yes, but then why is everyone so glib about it? Mercenaries can be re-bought, and turn from defender to attacker. Yet no one seems to be bothered by things like that. I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

“So you insist, and yet there may be no reason to fret so.”

“Really?”

“Really. Even the most cowardly human or beast will fight when they have something to protect. Perhaps it would be best to not think about a situation that you would have to be in to understand.”

Lawrence stared back at her and sighed. She was confident about her assessment, and his expression was only annoying her. There wasn’t anything wrong with what she said. It was even theoretically sound. But he just couldn’t agree. The situation just didn’t feel that passive, and Diva had to be up to something. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. That was when Holo surprised him.

“May I ask you a question?”

Her voice was right next to him, making his eyes open in shock. She hugged him from behind, as though covering him with a blanket. Her chin hovered over his head, and her long, brown hair fell over him, making him itch.

“Do you truly *think*?”

“..what do you mean?”

She hugged him more tightly to keep him from turning around. He couldn't see her face, ears or tail. He knew she could fool him with just a slight change in her voice, so he felt anxiety washing over him.

“I meant nothing more than what I asked.”

“..”

He remained silent, but knew he had to reply before she grew angry. But really, what was she asking? Maybe it would be best to let her get angry and find out? He was completely at a loss, and didn't even want to reply. Deep down, it upset him to be asked such a question. But her arms just kept hugging him tighter and tighter..

“..so?”

Had she asked angrily, he would have replied. But the hesitation in her voice made him pause even longer. He wasn't at all sure what she wanted him to say. It took him quite a long time to think it over.

“Yes. I *think*.”

“Liar.”

Her chin came to a rest on top of his head.

“Do not lie.”

“..Lie? I don't even know what you're talking about. Why are you asking me such a strange question?”

His mind was completely mixed up, but she ignored him. Her arms were still coiling around him more tightly. She was small, but even she could strangle him if she tried.

“You are lying. You do not think. You just act.”

Her tone was harsh, and it made him feel nervous. What had he said or done to upset her this time? Would her arms keep tightening until he suffocated? No, they finally stopped. She wasn't choking him, she was just stuck to him.



“Help me out here. I can’t figure it out, but I’m doing my best. Diva’s obviously up to no good, and there has to be a reason. If I missed anything, it’s not for lack of think-“

“Why must you insist that they are evil?”

His mind went blank. He wore his confusion on his face as he tried to desperately turn his head to see her ears.

“W-What?”

“I am asking you why you insist that this company must be evil?”

Her question had the same destructive effect as a competitor telling him his hair was messy during a negotiation.

“Well, I’m not insist-“

“Oh, so you *are* thinking.”

She cut him off, and her arms slackened.

“Ah, what a relaxed merchant..”

“Huh?”

He let some anger slip out with that grunt, but Holo wasn’t surprised to hear it. He could tell that she smiled in response, especially when her hand gently patted his back as though to comfort him.

“Well, you have money and time to roam around and see all of the vitality in this place. You investigate whether a war is starting, and everyone laughs it off. Then you learn that even barons are buying up property here, and finally discover an inexpensive shop. So ask yourself: what would be the best way to earn money in this situation?”

She loomed over him and added a “hmm?” He felt like he’d backed himself into a corner, but had no choice but to reply.

“Buying the shop.”

“Precisely. After all, if you buy it, the value will keep rising, will it not?”

She spoke with a satisfied tone, then released him and intentionally patted his head.

“So..”

She pulled her hands back and rested her chin on his head once more.

“Why are you hesitating?”

It finally sank in just what Holo was talking about.

“This is not like you.. should thinking not be making you *more* optimistic? Right now you are just..”

She paused and her tail flopped down like a bird beating its wings.

“..Obsessing over the worst case scenario.”

She had been urging him in the direction she felt he needed to be urged. But he was defying her, precisely because he suspected that Diva was up to no good. He knew he was stubborn, but why was he obsessing over this again? Diva was doing nothing unreasonable so far, and it was all quite clearly in their best interests. Truly, it was.

Holo’s suggestion that they were hiring mercenaries simply to protect themselves was quite sound. So why was he still suspicious? Or more specifically, why wasn’t he taking action? If he couldn’t get a straight answer out of anyone, then any thinking beyond a certain point was just a blurry wasteland of hypotheses. He had to take a stand and make a choice.

He was really resisting Holo’s urging because he was being compelled out of habit. He had become trained to look at all possible contingencies before doing anything remotely risky.

“You are thinking of giving up on the idea of opening your shop here, are you not?”

His first instinct was to disagree, but he couldn’t do it. He just couldn’t force the words out of his mouth. His throat was lined with lead, because he knew, deep down, that he wasn’t being as optimistic as he once was. Not since Holo came into his life.

“I see.”

He couldn’t make a noise, but of course that only meant he was agreeing with her question. He knew that, but he still said nothing. In a strange way, he didn’t feel anxious, but that was probably because Holo’s tone remained calm.

“So even someone as cheerfully optimistic as you can turn into someone like me, who only sees the dark side of everything. That is surely it, yes? I mean, it would be just like you to end up that way.”

She sighed, her head still perched atop his.

“While you investigated this place, I saw nothing but brilliance.”

She had even mentioned that as they rested on that excursion. At that time, his desire to open a shop was the furthest thing from his mind. She rubbed his head with her chin, perhaps surprised by his silence.

“This is an invigorating town, the kind that should only inspire you. The old you would say, ‘excellent, I will earn so much here,’ then immediately begin scheming to win.”

At first Lawrence couldn’t help but wonder just what kind of exaggerated image of him she had, but when he looked back he realized that it actually matched his actions quite well. He had never been this passive before. This doubtful. All because of Diva company. Because they were a mining firm, and Holo would never want to live in a place run by such a company.

“Do not worry so much for my sake.”

“But-”

Once again he was cut off as her arms hugged him tightly.

“Wherever you decide to open your shop, I will be there with you.”

She wasn’t denying him a chance to explain himself, she just wanted him to realize that he didn’t even have to.

“Even if they wish to dig up Yoitsu, or some other place, do not worry. Once they do, you will never open your shop, because there will always be something to be concerned over. You are a nervous sort, after all. You might even abandon your shop and flee it if something happens, and then never be able to return. Or am I wrong?”

She was smiling again, like she was laughing at the very notion, but her words were not that far removed from reality.

“The moment you know about something you begin caring about it, just like that fat sheep said.. and it will still exist even if you turn away. The people who I live with are not ancient or legendary, nor the kind who leave jokes for me on their claws. They are living, breathing, smiling people who know anger and sadness, are determined, but not entirely capable, and will hold my hand in the future.”

Indeed, he was unconsciously holding her hand. Her tail was happily wagging, noisily sweeping the floor.

“You see, that message Myuri left for me was so painful that it pierced my very soul. I just wanted to run off into a cave for the rest of my life. And yet-”

Her hand gripped his so tightly it was clear that she wouldn’t let him go. Tears were spilling

from her eyes.

“-you reached your hand out and pulled me back up.. have you any idea how happy that made me?”

Lawrence had been so worried that she would end up angry when he brought her here, but it turned out that he’d made the right choice after all. But Holo was being far too honest all of a sudden, and that worried him more than anything. If he so much as felt one of her tears land on his head, he knew he would stand up. He gripped her hand back, hoping to convey that.

“Being treasured by you makes me so happy.. but if all I am is a burden to you, it will make me miserable. After all..”

She lifted his chin so he could clearly see her sharp nails between his own fingers.

“So many sad stories are born from people’s desire to protect.”

Lawrence reflexively wanted to refute her, but quickly realized she was recalling his earlier words in order to play with him. He stayed silent, and just held the hand that was caressing his face.

“I will tell our story in the future, as I promised you, so I do not want it to be a sad one.”

She pinched his nose lightly between her fingers.

“I do not hate the look on your face when you do business, but the face I like the most is the one you wear when you write. It is so focused and calm. It looks.. well, handsome.”

She spoke in a flirty tone, obviously to conceal her embarrassment. She was clearly smiling, but if he looked up to confirm that, he would get a face full of her palm or her fangs.

“So, you..”

She didn’t finish her sentence right away. Instead, she released him. He finally stood up when he felt his hand dangling on its own. As she stepped back, he marvelled at how cold his back felt now that she wasn't stuck to it. Even after such a brief moment, it felt like the winter air was keeping them apart. It struck him profoundly. When he turned around, he wasn’t physically attacked, but rather accosted by a far more devastating smile of embarrassment.

“Do not use the excuse that you are researching for my sake. Will you not at least ride out into battle like a proper male?”

She placed her hands on her hip and flashed him a fang-filled smile.

“Even if this company does turn out to be evil, and you have to close up shop, we can simply

continue this happy trip of ours.”

Courage and recklessness were divided as thinly as a sheet of paper. The only thing that separated the two was one’s determination. No one wanted to admit it, but they couldn’t disagree, either.

“Indeed.”

He followed up on that brief reply immediately.

“But really, aren’t you just asking me to take a gamble? This time I could lose almost a thousand silver coins.. what kind of story will this become if I fail like that?”

If they weren’t so comfortable playing around, that line would have been quite damaging. Knowing this, Holo smiled back.

“That simply means that if you fail, I shall owe you tears worth a thousand silver coins. Just picture that.”

He knew she didn’t really want him to picture it, because she probably would be sad enough to do just that. She would blame herself so harshly that she wouldn’t even dare ask him to forgive her. Of course, that was precisely the kind of person his hands had reached out to. It was a scene so vivid in his memory that it gave him a headache.

“So you will just have to make sure not to fail, hmm?”

She said that with such a happy look on her face that it felt strange somehow. It was true that if he made it work, he would finally have his own shop, and that if he failed, Holo really would owe him dearly. He could wind up in debt for the rest of his life. He knew how important prudence was in this kind of situation.

It was just that Holo could remind him that it was *his* hard-earned money all day, but the moment she scratched his nose in just the right way, he would still do it for her. He considered himself an immoral and selfish man, but she held a monopoly over such thoughts in his mind. He just couldn’t help himself.

Holo was always saying that the Wisewolf couldn’t have a boring merchant for a companion, and yet here he was, not turning the key to unlock that rusty gate in his heart holding back his optimism and enthusiasm.

“You’re right, I really am a mess.”

She smiled back like a pure-hearted maiden, and he took a deep breath. It seemed she had already made her mind up the moment she saw him gawking at that empty building. She truly

did feel bad to see him holding back because he could only see Diva as an evil company.

No one knew how long Diva could keep this up, and even if they really didn't have any plans to go to war or open new mines, he could still draw the short end of the stick and wind up with an unsuccessful business with no clientele. But now, even in such a situation, he had a real companion to back him up. One that knew just how to spur him on. He had to talk to her with determination.

“Help me come up with a good name for our shop.”

She might very well be the most inspirational being in the world. She caught his uplifted spirits and smiled more broadly, but then gently spoke right into his ear.

“Do you not mean a good name for our child?”

He almost fell to the floor, chair and all. She pointed at him and laughed as he went red in embarrassment, partly from this and partly from what had happened to them in Lenos. He really was a mess, but now it was a mess that was nine-tenths rage.

She kept apologizing as they prepared for sleep, but he could no longer accept her smile. But there was still one-tenth of him that felt something other than rage, so he just shut his eyes and turned his back to her.

In the end, he was unable to come up with a name for the shop no matter how close it seemed to be. It was right on the tip of his tongue.. but it just vanished into a puff of dream logic as he fell asleep.

序 幕



## Chapter 5

The following morning, Myuri washed his face at the well alongside the other mercenaries. He then took a few shaky steps, pale-faced, as they watched him. He had been in dinner-side discussions for days now, and they were all proud to serve him. He was the captain who fought the tough battles in town to keep them supplied on the front lines.

When he heard them clapping and cheering him on, he did his best to stand tall. That only made them cheer even louder, despite knowing they ought to be out doing their respective jobs. They might seem a bit rude, but in reality they knew exactly just where their discipline and trust was needed. Lawrence felt compelled to reassess them, as he walked back to his room.

“What is with all that garish shouting?”

She sat on the bed as usual, combing her tail. It was such a natural scene to witness it made him feel like they had been traveling together for a century. She was even biting into more jerky, despite having just eaten breakfast. He playfully tugged at it, and she bit down even harder to compensate, just like a child.

Her bottomless appetite was about the only thing that could best her pride, so he let go of the jerky. After all, this was hardly a time to get into an argument. Merchants lived by the principle that once their minds were made up, they should press onward right away. He took a deep breath and popped his collar back into place.

“Alllll set.”

Holo also seemed ready, and quickly stood up and gave her tail one final pat.

“Hehe..”

“What is it?”

“Hmm?”

She acted like she didn’t even notice that she had laughed, and touched her face before replying in a puzzled tone.

“I was remembering how you looked in Pasloe when I saw you all those times in the past.”

He had no idea how to respond. She had lived in that village for hundreds of years, and he had traded there for a surprisingly long time as well. It wouldn’t be strange in the slightest for her to have seen him a few times before they officially met, but somehow, coming from her it felt quite strange.

“And?”

“You were never this calm and relaxed.”

She sighed with her right hand on her waist, like a sister talking about her stupid younger brother. He felt a bit annoyed to play that role, but he couldn't argue against it; he was young and stupid back then.

“I had not even noticed that you have grown into such an independent man.”

Lawrence had no desire to play the fool forever. He wanted to grow stronger than Holo, and would work extra hard to reach that goal. He knew he wasn't very mature, and that Holo had every right to point that out, so he usually just treated it like the joke or faint praise that it was. But this time, he had no idea what expression to wear, and that only made her happier.

“Do not be suspicious, I am not toying with you or looking down on you. I just truly feel that you have grown up.”

She said that so happily that it made him happy as well. But it also hit him with a wave of loneliness, because it felt something like a farewell.

“Do not make such a face, either.. I am simply too old to notice my own growth, so I must live vicariously through the wheat shoots budding around me.”

She wrapped herself in her robe and concealed her ears, then stood before him.

“I left Yoitsu in pursuit of my own happiness, and drank and danced all the way to Pasloe. Once there, I realized that one's happiness can only take them so far, and then they must seek meaningful growth with others.”

She was staring at his wallet. She knew they weren't going to pay for the store entirely with cash, but were simply paying a deposit to lay a claim on the building. She was getting to see Lawrence's dream expand and come to fruition, after watching those from her past vanish one by one. She couldn't forget the past, even if she wanted to, but after all of that she could even be satisfied to see the world through Lawrence's eyes.

“Hey, is it really alright for me to name the shop?”

Back when he'd made the suggestion, Holo did her best to pretend she wasn't surprised and felt obliged to do so. After all, like Huskins the Golden Sheep in Winfield Kingdom, and Hugh the art dealer in Gerube, this was going to be her new home. And yet, that act was dropped now, and she smiled up at him with anxious eyes. It was different to not be staring at her usual confidence, feigned or otherwise.

“Yes, because you’ve been a good child.”

He patted her head, and just for a moment he caught a glimpse of utter confusion on her face, like she didn’t know what he’d just done to her. But a moment after she had digested his words and actions, her face contorted and he braced himself for a good beating. Mercifully, her expression was halfway between tears and laughter.

“I have no regrets.”

He shook her hand, but didn’t let go. They left the inn with him unwilling to admit that the street looked very different now that she’d metaphorically beaten some sense into him. Pedestrians no longer seemed like unrelated actors, but rather potential customers for him to deal with in the future.

Or so he hoped. He still had no idea what Diva was planning, but the moment Holo said she would be with him, he let them off the hook. It would certainly be fun to try his hand at running a shop with the money he’d earned over his life. Obviously, he would still carefully evaluate the condition of the building and such, but such huge changes in one’s life came with risks that one had to take. And this was the biggest career risk he’d ever ventured to take.

They held hands as usual as they walked down the lively streets, but today Holo wasn’t asking him to buy anything. She was smiling and standing tall, as though she was proud to walk beside him. He’d picked her up in Pasloe, and they had made it this far after much effort. Those who knew Lawrence well would call him mad, but even if he was, he had no regrets.

He looked at Holo, and she returned his gaze when she detected it. He smiled, surprised, but she also smiled back. That was all he needed to see. There was no hesitation this time as he walked that now-familiar road to the shop that awaited them. When he asked, he was told it had no name yet, but it was quite a lively road at the summit of Lesco’s development.

No matter what Diva was planning, it was just their own gamble made possible by their wealth. All people with a bit of wealth had their ambitions, and that was probably what drew the barons in to join them. They wanted to draw in other people with status so the town’s reputation would be secure. That would help them on their road to becoming rulers.

Lawrence and Myuri were just complicating matters because that was their job. At least, that might as well be the case. It was too enticing to assume they had an ulterior motive for spending money they knew they wouldn’t get back. But in the end, that only meant that this was a golden chance for Lawrence. He really could earn a lot in this atmosphere.

He had finally settled on opening his shop here, so second-guessing himself wasn’t permitted: only determination. If he failed at that fundamental rule, he would be a failure as a merchant. Holo was right. Once he opened his shop, his love for the town could only grow. It sounded stupid to hear himself say it that way, but he knew there would be unanticipated benefits to

help him along.

For instance, if Diva kept expanding the town they might one day form an economic alliance as vast as Ruvik's. It was nice to finally dream like that again, and he did so on their entire walk up to the building. Twelve hundred silver coins, and it would be his. He would pay his money, and take his chances.

With luck, Diva wouldn't treat him any differently from the others, and with all those barons investing in the town, that seemed likely. A baron wouldn't settle for marginal returns instead of piles of gold and silver, so Diva wasn't likely to be doing anything too shady when it came to business.

Money made the world go round, and the only thing that would make barons even happier was having their faces on the coins. That wasn't to say that they wouldn't settle for the face of some other king, of course, especially if those coins were as popular as Trenni silvers were, even in the north. Investing in a town like this was a surefire way for them to gather such coins.

Diva's plan was so perfect that Lawrence could hardly believe it. In fact, he found himself surprised that they didn't just issue their own coins.

"Huh.."

"What?"

Lawrence looked at Holo, wanting to ask her if he'd actually said something, but realized how stupid that would sound. His mind was racing, and it felt like everything was suddenly coming into view, like he'd spotted the person he'd been waiting for in the crowd before them.

Holo's eyes were already asking him, "are we not going to the shop?" All he could do was stare back and try to figure that out for himself. Memories were popping up and mixing in with reality, until he could barely even understand the chatter of the people ahead of them.

Barons were investing only for profits.. Diva truly wanting to occupy the north.. a strange situation in the currency market.. silver more expensive than gold.. those thoughts were swirling around like keys in his mind, glittering as they flew into the locks that had been uncovered in his recent conversations with Myuri and Holo.

"What is the matter?"

Holo pressed him, but he really didn't know what he should do. He couldn't believe the answer he'd found. This lively town, with its free people, wild market and loyal mercenaries.. he'd finally figured it all out. It was so simple, and so elegant, but what lay on the other side of the door that his mind was unlocking was something horrible indeed. In hindsight, it was so obvious.. he'd just been overthinking the whole time.

“Hey, will you stop ahead-”

She was angry, but this time it was he who grabbed her shoulder and hugged her tightly. It wasn't even to play with her, like she often did to make him feel uncomfortable in crowds like this. It was far out of character for him to do something like this outside of a narrow alley, and well beyond his own expectations of himself.

He was so elated that if Holo's ears weren't right in front of his mouth, he would be shouting with joy. If he was right, Diva's plan was so crazy it was going to be *huge*. Their strange currency market, their town bereft of walls, their willingness to pay all expenses to house barons and mercenaries.. and the rumors they were spreading.

When he finally released Holo, she seemed to be in shock. He proudly waltzed into the shop, and saw the receptionist playing with a cat. Normally, the man would disinterestedly watch the merchants taking a look around, but seeing Lawrence walking up to him immediately seemed to catch him as off guard as it did Holo.

The man was still trying to form a greeting as Lawrence silently took out his wallet and placed it on the counter in front of him. He was smiling the whole time. If Diva could gamble like this, so could he. And he *would* win this time. When the man before him finally put two and two together and realized that Lawrence was placing a deposit, he snapped into action.

"G-Give me a second..”

He ran off, but Lawrence didn't care to watch. He just glanced at a nearby chair, shivering with excitement. When he finally looked up at Holo, her eyes made her discomfort clear.

“I just discovered something extraordinary.”

“Oh?”

Her voice was dull, but he didn't have any inclination to laugh at her this time. He just smiled back, advertising his intent to attempt something equally extraordinary. He looked in the eyes and continued.

“Diva company is trying to start a trade war.”

“What-?”

“And the entire region will be caught up in it.”

He cut her off, and her lips kept flapping as though she couldn't settle on what words to say before her mind moved on. She seemed to be calculating just how Lawrence might gain or lose from this discovery.

The first thing a merchant learned was that a loss usually had some hidden gains that came with it for one to discover. If Diva was going to make off like bandits by waging a war of commerce, then he *had* to take advantage of it. Buying the shop would earn him dearly in such a war. Obviously, the barons felt the same way.

Thinking back to the Winfield Kingdom, he'd directly dealt with the Ruvik Alliance, who held more sway than any king. Even Eve had heard of them. They evaluated the competition in markets like this, and waged in "trade wars."

These weren't wars fought with swords, but by merchants who sat in front of desks and manipulated trades in far off lands, to exchange goods with the other side of the world. That was how they waged such a war, and it was as legitimate as any other. That is what Diva was up to.

Not long after he'd arrived at that conclusion, men from Ponds' company came running up to him. They were effectively a branch of Diva company, though they might not even realize it. In fact, they didn't seem to.

The man they were dealing with was daring to make a lofty bet, yet they didn't realize it. If they did, they certainly wouldn't be calmly telling Lawrence about the situation in town or the power structure here.

Lawrence was daydreaming over the course of the entire discussion. He didn't come to until they had already been escorted back to their room at the inn, and he was staring at an unhappy Holo, sitting on the edge of her bed.

"I take it you'd like to know what I'm on about?"

He spoke like a stage actor preparing for a monologue. She looked at him, but since she couldn't fly into a rage, she simply sighed.

"What you mean to say is plainly written on your face: 'Please let me explain.'"

Even her tail wagged like it was sighing.

"Oh my, yes."

"..I have no idea how you continue to grow ever more patient, but very well. You may make your little explanation."

As long as she was willing to listen, he didn't mind her acting so annoyed. He gladly dove into his explanation, and patiently watched her brow furrow more and more deeply as he continued. It seemed like she was only growing more incredulous, but that was to be expected

when Diva was attempting something so incredible.

It all came down to what they were good at, trade, and how it could be used as a weapon of war. They were competing with a series of northern states that had not been united for decades. No one should die, and there should be no sad tragedy this time. People would just be stunned at first, and then happily cheer when they realized how it worked in their favor. Wars weren't all waged with bloody battles.

In fact, Lawrence was explaining himself so excitedly that he didn't even feel nervous when they heard anxious footsteps followed by furtive knocking on their door. If he was right, then he knew what they were talking about - they were right on schedule.

"Mr. Lawrence! Big news!"

Moid shouted loudly, and Lawrence flashed Holo a smile as he opened the door. The look on Moid's face was the same he probably wore when enemies were cresting a hill to attack them.

"Ah, Mr. Lawrence, huge news! My men just informed me that a new sign has just been posted in the square--"

Lawrence nodded.

"Yes, I'm sure they have."

Moid blinked in surprise.

"Oh, you've seen it already?"

Lawrence shook his head.

"Then how do you know?"

Moid was confused, but Lawrence didn't even entertain the notion that he had guessed incorrectly. He just stood tall and made his proclamation.

"I'm assuming that it was announcing that a new currency is being issued, yes?"

Moid was so stunned he couldn't respond for a moment.

"Exactly.."

From the look in his eyes, he was clearly wondering how Lawrence already knew given that he hadn't during their conversation the previous night. Perhaps if his head hadn't been so full of uncertainty about buying an inexpensive shop (which wasn't inexpensive to him personally), he would have already figured out how the pieces fit last night. But it was meaningless to

speculate about that; like his relationship with Holo, he had to stop thinking and take action eventually. He straightened his collar.

“Diva is a group of merchants, and I am a merchant as well.”

Holo could laugh at him all she wanted, but he truly was a merchant.

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The streets were now very noisy. Of course, the merchants were the ones who had pushed up to the front of the crowds.

Rulers had issued their own currencies in the past and would continue to do so in the future. It was both emblematic of their power, and something they could earn a great deal of profit from. Yet, Diva company wasn't issuing a currency for such simple and classic reasons. They had taken great pains to patiently bait the big fish, even going so far as to fatten up the smaller fish around them.

This wasn't just a simple matter of exchange rates. Trenni silver coins, a standard currency in the south, were flooding the northern markets. But soon enough, no matter how much the barons made from the effort, they would run out of coins. Then how would people buy and sell their goods and services?

It made sense that Holo would guess that Diva would simply mint more coins. Supply and demand was a basic premise, and Diva was practically swimming in mined minerals. But Lawrence was also right; they couldn't just mint more Trenni coins, since people would see right away that they were counterfeits from how new they were. The more famous a currency, the easier it was to tell when it was being faked.

But not a brand new currency. Such problems simply didn't exist in that case. Diva could apply their resources free of such worries, and as expected, the streets of Lesco were brimming with excitement over the prospect of a new currency. The first to celebrate were those like Lawrence, who had figured it out ahead of time. The town's residents were the next to celebrate.

“Diva company, under the authority of the following barons, is to issue the following new coins: .. silvers, .. coppers, ...”

The coin purities being declared on that sign were possibly the purest ever declared in history. In fact, merchants would have a tough time accepting that such purities were viable. It would have to be a struggle to maintain them. Of course, most people would feel that would be a simple matter for a mining firm like Diva. They should have no problem given their stock of precious metals.

Even more importantly, the sign announced their intended exchange rates as well. Within two years, Diva would exchange all of the Trenni silvers in the region with their new ones. As bold as the sign was, it would be even more effective when people realized why Diva had been collecting Trenni silvers to keep this town running.

They had not only stimulated the economy at their own cost, but also flooded the northern markets with those silvers. Even more sly, the value of all the lesser coins had been essentially wiped out already, because everyone would naturally prefer the stabler ones. That was just the way coins worked, and no one would bat an eye over the concept of a better currency supplanting a poorer one.

Diva had been building towards establishing their new currency in the entire north, which had dozens of coins already. Having all of them replaced with a simpler system of coins, easy enough for children to figure out, would feel to the people like the gods had finally answered their prayers.

The icing on the cake was how smoothly Diva had made this work. They had simplified the exchange rates so people had a profitable reason to exchange to Trennis, and now they were in a position to replace those Trenni silvers with their own. They wouldn't even have to post copies of this sign everywhere, and already had the barons on their side. They had executed their plan masterfully.

Even an illiterate farmer coming to town to hock his harvest would have no trouble understanding all of this, so of course they had to keep people like Lawrence and the other merchants out of the loop somehow. Why else would they spread all of those rumors? In fact, they had pulled the wool over the eyes of even the mercenaries and barons who were spreading those rumors and collecting those coins for them.

Even Myuri had been confused by their inaction, when they were rumored to be preparing for war. Seeing them appear to just be wasting time would of course stump someone like him, to the point where he would even turn to someone like Lawrence, a mere traveling merchant, for help. It made Lawrence feel a bit better about himself to know that he could still figure this sort of scheme out.

First, the rumors.. all those gathered soldiers and coins would make *anyone* believe they were starting a war. A mining company would only do something like that to open new mines in the territory they conquered. And yet, nobody could figure out who was going to be attacked.

The people in the north would probably be sweating over this every day, since there were so many hills and valleys and all were under the rule of a different baron. They really only had two choices; band together, or accept defeat. Of course those barons would do everything they could to bargain with Diva, who held all the cards.

The more the rumors spread, and the more Diva worked with those barons, the more credible

the whole idea became. If someone didn't join Diva, they would regret it. That's how any baron would be forced to think. Especially when more and more mercenaries were also gathering in Lesco. What baron could stand up to that?

As a consequence, Lesco itself became a vibrant economic center. More buildings kept popping up, with more people to live in them. Anyone with a bit of smarts would have invested here, and indeed, Myuri's words made it clear that the smarter barons had already done so.. and not a small number of them, either.

All of them were like Lawrence, buying up buildings as an investment that should go up in value as long as the town remained viable. A new currency was the natural conclusion to keep it that way; it was a symbol of power. No matter how iffy it felt at first, no one would complain when they saw their own lands improving and more and more coins in their pockets.

In fact, this entire trade war was really just the last move to expand the region that Diva's new currency dominated. The more they issued, the more powerful it was. It was a consequence of inflation. If nobody used the currency, it was of course useless. In order to make more, Diva had to ensure there was demand. Again, their plans were practically flawless.

Lawrence remembered the fourteen different currencies he had to buy in Lenos to head up north. It was obvious that everyone wanted a unified currency to deal with that mess, so Diva would be promoted as a savior of sorts. Lawrence was right to think of Diva as waging a war, but he had been misled into thinking it was a war with the soldiers they were gathering.

In the end, Diva had simply been defending their town without even needing a wall, and every merchant had been fooled by their ploy. When one read the names of those powerful northern barons on their proclamatory sign, it was clear that they had actually been busy trying to get the clout necessary to issue their currency in those lands.

The barons hardly had a choice, but that was still Diva's actual aim. When everyone was using a superior currency and living in an economically stable area, nobody would want to be left out - it would be a disaster. Outsiders wouldn't be able to buy anything, let alone sell. They would be an island of misery, starving in a sea of their would-be enemies.

By the time the dust settled, the barons involved would have effectively signed over their rulership to Diva. Without their own currency, they could hardly maintain rule, when their peasantry could simply flock to a freer land with more opportunity. If they tried to supplant such migrations, they would have to contend with Diva and all of the barons who sided with them. They would have no chance.

This was actually like the historical practice of arranged political marriages, though coins were even more effective than humans were as the collateral. Political marriages simply couldn't stop wars as effectively as money could. Diva's plan was basically a perfect way to unite the divided north.

A physical war would have to contend with the awful geographical layout of the north, and political marriages would falter, but money was a universal language. In a sense, it was the optimal way to solve the problem. Even the Ruvik Alliance could stand up to kings who tried to hinder their trading, but they still did so the old way with boats and physical conflict.

By contrast, Diva was achieving their ends with a new currency, which benefited everyone. They weren't just barbarians out to rob and pillage, nor were they just a band of barons driven purely by self-motivated greed. They were merchants. They were orchestrators. They did what everyone was hoping for.

Barons had to conquer their neighbors to expand, but merchants could simply tweak some numbers - perhaps decrease a tax here to increase sales, for instance. There was no need for them to use excessive force.

Kings could listen to their royal merchant's council, but they rarely did. Brainless kings could survive, but not brainless merchants. People could respect a merchant who had demonstrated his aptitude, and Diva was the first company poised to become as powerful as a king, without fighting a single physical battle.

"A new era begins!"

Myuri raised his glass and shouted after Lawrence explained the situation to everyone. His shout actually sounded a bit lonely somehow, like he shared Holo's feeling that time was leaving him behind.

"Money is powerful no matter the age, but it isn't almighty. Diva just knows how to make it seem that way. We didn't even have to bloody our swords before the barons surrendered."

"We truly never did."

Moid sighed like all energy had left him.

"Weep for our lot, my brothers! We have lost our utility, and become mere actors! And yet, we have earned far more than I ever imagined."

He knocked the bag of money on the table like he wanted to destroy it.

"Whose fault is this!?"

The town was thrown into chaos the moment the sign was posted. Myuri had just made it back to the inn, and Diva had to ask him right back out again. By the time he returned that evening, his face was a mess. No one dared say a word to him, because he'd received their pay, but it wasn't for fighting - it was indeed for acting.

Mercenaries loved their band, to the point they gave their lives for it. Even that young minister and silversmith, Fran, didn't realize just how much she had contributed to her own band until their time came to an end. They weren't just like friends or distant relatives, they were practically like blood siblings.

And now, they were earning more as actors than they ever had as warriors. It was too much to bear knowing that Diva company had hired them not to fight traditionally, but simply to stand around and show off their numbers to win the war. When money could solve a problem, it didn't require much effort from people like them. Even a child knew that.

Of course, just about everyone was happy that they had avoided fighting a war. It was just that change was almost as terrifying. Even Holo had lingered in the wheat fields of Pasloe long after she was no longer welcome. Her loneliness and pain might have driven her to tears, but she still fought on. Of course the mercenaries would feel disappointed.

Myuri, however, was a born leader. He knew that he needed to get them good and drunk, to vent their frustration. He even poured the wine himself. They were all confused about what to do in the future.. live on as warriors, or stay behind and start a new life?

"Not even Moid or I can answer that question so easily anymore."

He laughed at himself.

"I'm just glad you're here, Mr. Lawrence. I never realized just how terrifying money can be."

Lawrence just stared at the wine in his glass and smiled. A half a year ago, he would have to add ginger or lime juice to the terrible wine he drank, but now he was enjoying the finest wine he could ask for. Everything in his life had changed, right down to the wine he drank.

"That's exactly how I used to think, but the people I've been meeting lately have shown me just how naive and innocent I am about money."

Norah and Eve had given their lives up for money, both in different ways. Cole and Elsa proved to him that living was impossible without money. Holo had taught him how to enjoy his money. If he had continued on his own, he knew he would never have been able to open his own shop like this. He would have kept a miserly hold on his wallet until he finally collapsed out of illness or died in an accident. He would never have been able to deduce something as grand as Diva's ambitions on his own.

"I could never have imagined something as grand as Diva's plan. Oh, I understand it, but coming up with something like that would be impossible for someone like me, even if I was fortunate enough to meet Holo."

Holo called herself the Wisewolf, but there were limits to even her abilities. She could put the

pieces together quite readily, but if she didn't know what the pieces were, she would be just as lost as Myuri. That was why she drank so unhappily, having realized that Myuri and his band were in the same situation she had been in herself. She only smiled and raised her glass to match Myuri, when he raised his glass and decried the fact that he was born in the wrong age.

“I guess you just can't fight the sands of time.”

Moid's emotionless voice echoed all the way down to Myuri's narrow office, like a voice from the distant past.

“Back in my youth, such things were the responsibility of barons and their knights.. nobles. Now, nobles are no longer knights, and kings just sit tight in their castles. They just hire mercenaries like us and get fatter and richer, just like town merchants. You do realize who it was that finally crossed the open seas and discovered the new world?”

Moid was staring at Lawrence, and giving him no choice but to say the obvious in an unpleasant tone.

“Merchants, I'll bet.”

Lawrence had in fact read the journal written by a merchant who had sailed around the world. Building ships, hiring mariners, and the actual sailing - these all required money. And the investments made had to pay off. Not just any rough hand could handle that kind of effort; someone who was only motivated by self-gain couldn't do it. In that regard, merchants were perhaps the most curious people in the world. They believed undiscovered lands were the most ripe for making money, and they never lost in terms of curiosity when it came time to go on an adventure.

“Don't be too picky about your hirer, just make sure you aren't being bought like a product. That's one of the few things my father ever taught me.”

Myuri nodded, and Moid agreed. This time, they were talking without the presence of those two young staff officers.

“Did you know how competitive it is in the world of mercenaries, Mr. Lawrence? Even just to win the works of the best ironsmiths, made for mercenaries? “The Spears of Freedom” are one of the oldest bands, yet they don't care about who hires them - just about money. They don't fight for flag and fame, just fortune.”

Myuri squinted and smiled. He knew Lawrence wasn't the same kind of adaptable people they were, and couldn't really respond to that kind of statement. He had no choice but to change the topic.

“Indeed. Say, since there won't be any war here in the end, where will you be heading next?”

Yoitsu.. or Tolchin, or whatever it's called now?"

That was their plan, but if the war had been cancelled then Lawrence had to find someone else who could escort him and Holo to Yoitsu. After all, he had just bought a store, and even if they didn't expect him to pay it off all at once, he had no choice but to get down to business and repay his loans. He didn't have the benefit of being in a guild or company, after all.

"Ah, that's right.. we're not on a familiar horse anymore, are we? If we stay here we'll be able to find jobs, but that doesn't really suit me. I think I'll have to head on south and try to keep living in the past."

He spoke with such sadness that it almost sounded like he was drunk. Moid calmly interjected.

"Whether this is a general trend or just a miracle that happened here doesn't matter. We can take our time and find out."

"No, I still want to travel through our homes, so our men can visit their families and give them what they've earned."

"Then.. may we join you?"

Hearing Lawrence ask that way made Myuri's face scrunch up. Lawrence suddenly regretted asking him that way, especially when Holo poked him in the side.

"If I refused, what kind of thankless descendant would I be?"

His voice was serious and harsh, underscoring just how easily Lawrence kept forgetting that the deity he traveled with was, in fact, a deity. She was the central myth that gave birth to this band of mercenaries, so of course they had a duty to proudly return her home. Their existence demanded it. Holo sighed as Lawrence apologized.

"We'll probably be off in four or five days, maybe sooner if they move more quickly.."

He spoke as he flung open the window shutters. The sun had set, but it was still as raucous outside as it had been earlier. The restrictions on fire had been lifted for the night, and people everywhere were drinking at tables and dancing around bonfires, even on such a cold night that felt like it was about to snow.

Not many of them would know just how much of an impact a new currency would have, but they certainly had cause to celebrate. When a town issued a new currency it gained a special status. That is, their reputation increased, and even more people would flock there with gleams of hope in their eyes. This was a huge event, and celebration was exactly what the situation called for.

“But I really don’t think they’ll move more quickly. Not after being so careful all this time. That would be like chasing the rabbit right back into its hole. Maybe if the hole lead somewhere special, but a rabbit hole is just a rabbit hole, after all.”

Myuri’s voice was fraught with disappointment. He sipped his wine, possibly admiring those who didn’t even need to hunt rabbits on their own, just like Lawrence. And for his part, even though he had come to Diva with such hostile intent, Lawrence was now proud to be a merchant again after seeing their work. He marvelled at how quickly his mind had changed, but Diva deserved his admiration. They were probably throwing a huge party at their headquarters right now.

“As a mercenary, it’s always good to see the world changing. After all, we mercenaries live in the cracks between the ages.”

He was being intentionally sarcastic, but Moid and the others still raised their glasses in toast.

“And it seems we’re not the only ones..”

He was looking outside.

“Is that one of Rapoldt’s young men?”

“Haha, their captain likes to drink just as much.”

Despite appearances, Myuri loved historical celebrations as much as the next person, even if wine was necessary for that enjoyment. Not that long afterward, a knock was heard on the door, and the young man from Rapoldt arrived to extend an invitation to Myuri.

“Well, I can’t refuse this, so you guys have fun!”

He asked Moid to take care of the rest, then grabbed a bunch of gold coins from their sack of pay and handed them to him. Lawrence had already seen a pile of gold like this back in Gerube, but he’d never seen anyone handle them so casually. It really made clear just how different mercenaries and merchants were.

“I’m off!”

He put on his coat as though he was annoyed, but his face betrayed how happy he was. After all, he was no older than Lawrence, so despite his serious act, he couldn’t entirely conceal his mirth.

“Well, then I should head downstairs. What about the two of you?”

He counted the gold Myuri had given him, and dropped half of them into a sack before standing up. He was making it clear that he wasn’t telling them to join him downstairs.

“I shall return to my room. I can only tarnish my image in such an exciting environment.”

“Hoho, a wise choice. Wine tastes best in a quiet place, and the men downstairs are loud enough to muddy water with their voices alone. I doubt you would enjoy it.”

He laughed and saw them out of the room with the coins in his hand. They could hear the ruckus downstairs even from the second floor, so it was clear just how drunk everyone was getting.

“I’m afraid I really don’t have the luxury either.. not after spending all of my money on that deposit.”

Moid’s eyes went round as saucers when he heard Lawrence say that.

“Then you really..?”

“Yes, in a heartbeat.”

“Oh ho.. congratulations! Surely it’s the most important trade you’ve made as a man.”

He then lightly smacked his forehead like Myuri would. Perhaps it was a habit Myuri picked up from being around Moid for so long. Almost like an old married couple. Lawrence looked at Holo with that thought, but she looked back with a puzzled look in her eyes. He just smiled back and kept his mouth shut.

“But really, congratulations. I really didn’t expect you would, but it was perfect timing, wasn’t it?”

In a town so awash in excitement, even that shop would have been more expensive the next day. Had Lawrence not paid the deposit in time, it might even have even been sold before he could conjure up enough to buy it.

“Yes, and thank God for that.”

Moid seemed even more surprised to hear Lawrence say that. He looked over at Holo, wondering if that was something inappropriate to say in front of her. When he saw that she didn’t care in the slightest, he seemed to finally understand their relationship; at least to some extent.

“What an odd world we live in. Anyway, I hope the two of you have a wonderful night.”

Moid then disappeared down the stairs.

“Alright, let’s head back to the room.”

He looked back at Holo and saw her pouring herself another glass of the strong wine from the jar on Myuri's desk.

"We already have wine in our room."

"Surely you jest? How could we let such fine wine go to waste?"

The wine in their room was already quite a luxurious vintage, but Myuri's was even finer. A young worker seemed to have noticed Myuri and Moid had left, giving him a chance to tidy the room, but he hesitated when he saw Lawrence and Holo.

"See, you're even making things awkward for this lad. Let's go."

He paid the boy a tip and pulled Holo away. She followed him gravely, keeping her eyes on the glass she had just carefully filled to the brim, drop by drop.

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"What? You don't want to go outside?"

The celebration outside was so fantastic that he couldn't believe the Wisewolf would just go to sleep.

"..not really."

Her sincere-sounding reply confused him, but he soon shouted in understanding.

"Ah.. you're worried about the money?"

She was looking elsewhere, but her ears jumped up the moment she heard him say that. He knew that with such a party outside, she couldn't be happy cooped up in their room with even the finest of wines. She knew that with just a word, she could pop the cork on his wallet more easily than any bottle of wine. Still, even if she really was worried about the money, he was just playing around.

"I made sure I still have enough to afford the good wine you love so much."

He took her glass and sipped from it, mourning the drops that splashed out as he did so. Holo didn't move to snatch it back, however.

"Truly?"

She asked him playfully as her tail wagged excitedly under her robe. It went without saying that she didn't have to ask, and that he would do whatever she asked, so he confidently replied

after taking a sip and burping.

“Of course-”

And yet, his mouth was covered before he could even say so.

“It seems that trouble is already afoot..”

That was just the kind of thing he always said.

“Where is your sense of saving? You are far too relaxed.”

She’d already won just like that. Only then did she happily snatch the glass back from him, and sip from it as she walked away.

“However.”

She looked back after coming to a stop. Her face was so beautiful that he wanted to grab it and rub his against hers.

“Since you are offering, I shall join you.”

With each step he took toward her, her expression became gentler and more seductive. When he was close enough to finally take her hand, as she obviously wanted, she could no longer hold in her salacious smile and shot him an accusing look.

“Don’t drink too much!”

He knew that smile meant she wasn’t going to listen, but she still *harumphed* in response. The entire town was in the square tonight, and all of the stalls were serving food and drinks. They couldn’t even make it to the square, it was so packed. They ended up sitting down at a spice dealer’s stall, but with no guilds to enforce things even a spice dealer could sell wine at a moment’s notice.

Lawrence was the only one seated there, however. The moment they arrived, Holo requested a silver coin and ran into the stall like a child. She soon returned with food, but ran off the instant she had set it down at their table. After four more of her trips back and forth, even the stall owner raised an eyebrow between sips of wine.

“Ho, ho..”

Warning her to not overeat was even more useless than warning her to not overdrink. All Lawrence could do was stare at the mountain of food before her. Jeez.. of course he wasn’t saving money anymore. That was no longer his priority. Money was still his bigger business priority, and he still yearned for it like he yearned for the summer sun, but he didn’t want to be

so scorched by it that he forgot about his happiness.

He was opening a shop, and several years or decades later, he would sit here again with Holo and look around. Would he still remember how he felt this very moment? He couldn't be sure, but he did trust that they would be just as happy when that time came. He had always wanted a big business of his own, ever since the sun had risen in his life. That was why he traveled, so by the time it set, he had a home of his own to return to.

Now that he was so close to having one, he also had an unexpected gift sitting beside him. If he could meet his younger self, still suffering the hardships of an apprentice, he would tell himself not to worry: his hard work would pay off. He couldn't help but chuckle at such a fanciful notion.

“What are you laughing at?”

Holo barely chewed her chicken, and swallowed it cartilage and all.

“How can I not laugh, when I'm so happy?”

He replied with another smile, finally able to calmly look into her eyes while saying something so embarrassing. It was downright easy now. She wanted to laugh back at him, but his calmness seemed to make that impossible.

“Just how can you be so calm? Honestly, you are doomed to always mess up.”

That was the best retort she could offer.

“I just never imagined anything like this when you first asked me to take you home.”

He lifted a piece of chicken off her plate and let the fine taste fill his mouth.

“I can no longer clearly remember who it was who asked. It seems my memory is already fading.”

Her ears could tell whether a person was lying, so he took a breath to steady his nerves.

“And yet, you made it back, no?”

“Not yet.”

She corrected him, but not with a dark tone. She clearly wanted him to stop talking about it.

“Alright, then let's forget about that for now.”

He couldn't help but lick his fingers, then have some bread topped with beans to dry them off.

It didn't matter who planted the beans. Everyone involved in getting them here was related to a merchant like Lawrence. He didn't know them personally, but felt connected to them in a sense.

Money was the same as beans, in that it became one's motivation to earn profit. Of course, it took a little help from God, but ever since he'd met Holo, he'd been able to put his wants and his needs into perspective. His failures and arguments with Holo amounted to a belief that he could continue succeeding in the future.

Looking back on every step they had taken, none of them were truly whimsical or strange. They were just more layers to help build up his common sense and knowledge of the world. It still felt incredible to be sitting with and talking to someone like Holo, and he still worried that she might vanish like a bubble if he reached out to her, but his terror over that actually happening was long gone.

He had been beaten back as he forced her to take his hand, but he had still come out of it all as a normal merchant. He placed his hand on the table and broke their silence.

"Let's figure out what to do once we get there."

He had been trying so hard to avoid the topic, but it felt like he could finally give it a voice. Holo wore no smile, but nor was she surprised. She turned away in anger, but he stayed calm. She peeked at him out of the corner of her eye.

"You will go forward on your own."

That seemed a childish thing to say, and in fact it was.

"I have the same paws as Myuri. I must stay."

Even in such a happy town, there could still be sad people. Some humans had the same worry, that time was leaving them behind. But he realized that she knew he would sadden her by parting ways with her when they finally reached Yoitsu.

"Not long ago, you were trying so desperately to chase me down."

Boy, had he ever. Back in Lenos, he had turned the town upside-down just to stay with her. It felt like mere days ago he had been a different, more daring man. It was like he had never really cared about being a merchant at all.

Diva company were merchants as well, but they had also achieved something that no other merchant had. They weren't just directing actors, they were directing the world around them. In a town like this, such reckless and grandiose thoughts were perfectly acceptable.

Lawrence glanced at Holo, who returned his gaze like a cat that didn't want his affection. She held her glass like she was warming her hands over a fire, and he noticed just how small and thin the hands that supported him through all of those problems really were.

“Indeed, I chased after you quite hard. Shouldn't you let me catch you by now?”

She cast her eyes downward, until she could no longer tolerate it any longer and laughed. She had to be thinking him a fool of a male for being this excited by such a tiny accomplishment, and yet, when she sighed and looked up it was the look of one who had been defeated.

“That is true.. you have been working hard.”

She set her glass down.

“You have fulfilled your promise. So the future..”

She clamped her mouth shut before she finished, but he knew what that greasy mouth was going to say anyhow, so he didn't force the issue. Soon he would be back to the daily grind of business after taking such a dream-like vacation. He had jobs to do, and problems to solve. And once those things were done, he already knew what he would do.

There was no need for him to act tough, or think of ridiculous schemes. He had the Wisewolf with him. Holo would never forget him, even after his time came. He had to hold the reins tight, and make sure that she was left with something worth holding onto in the end. She smiled and looked at him with embarrassment, as though having divined his thoughts yet again.

That settled it. He slowly shifted his hand over to hers, knowing that no more words were necessary. He needed to burn this scene into his mind, so that in the future when his eyes finally closed for the last time, it was all he could see. She fidgeted as though his hand would scald her, and her small shoulders looked somehow even smaller. Even in this festival-like atmosphere, she still acted this way.

Suddenly a bag crashed down between them, the light kind of bag that one would sling over their shoulder. One that he instantly knew had nothing valuable inside it. In fact, he didn't have to look at it closely for the image of its owner to fill his mind. It was someone poor, who should be on a journey right now.

That person had few belongings to call his own, and had perhaps been that way for his entire life. Just what was he doing here, carelessly dropping his bag on their table? Lawrence's hand was no longer en route to Holo's, but he was still in a good mood. Even if that person was clearly so drunk he carelessly dropped his bag between them. Lawrence could forgive him today.

But the moment he noticed something off about the bag, and studied it more closely, his mind

went entirely blank.

“Kraft Lawrence, I presume.”

That wasn't the voice he should be hearing. Why were Holo's eyes so round? And why was some random drunk dropping this bag in front of him? This bag should be with its owner, far, far away from here..

“And Holo, the Wisewolf.”

Whoever it was that threw Cole's bag on the table was wrapped in a cloak and calling their names. If all the world's a stage, where everyone's just trying to make it until the curtain finally falls, then there was really no distinction between a comedy and a tragedy.



