



*Drunken Wolf  
Translations*

# Volume 16

狼 と 香 辛 料

*Spice and Wolf*

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**Released:** 07/15/13

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Special Thanks to all contributors  
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skyswiper	Viserion	Noob_Rus	thewho	midna25	dolcetriade024	dragonlegs	Nidhogg
exigoo	Alav	Greenwolf	SekeWolf	Pharaohs	anarchy	Harflin	pointgiven
Zero_G	Javban	fabrice	Yukesel	inferno009	Blues	Thalos	zantex
kitsunisan	LL BDUB	idonteven	Eseraphymn	Bourei	shindrgn	oreimo	tetra
albaris	Austin123457	bryel	arcdev	damamm	bobm3	Cloudpkk	Atline
paganus12	Vataro	3bucko	weaselking	zeit	John5p	M.A.D	Deathmaw
darkreaper	Dj_seaghost	ifail99	SephVin	Shanhaevel	Jshway	Darksky	Aesmedis
Bluemaveric	Redacted	Kraim	ugondown1	pt87	Refluxive	ElanTedronai	lighost
HFisch	Icee3600	Storm2k	matty543	compboylt	kama	padl23	vortexcontinuum
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支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Merchant  
meats  
spicy wolf.

狼と香料

太陽の金貨〈下〉 XVI

# 狼と香辛料



太陽の金貨〈下〉

支倉凍砂

Isuna Hasekura

Illustration

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Jyu Ayakura





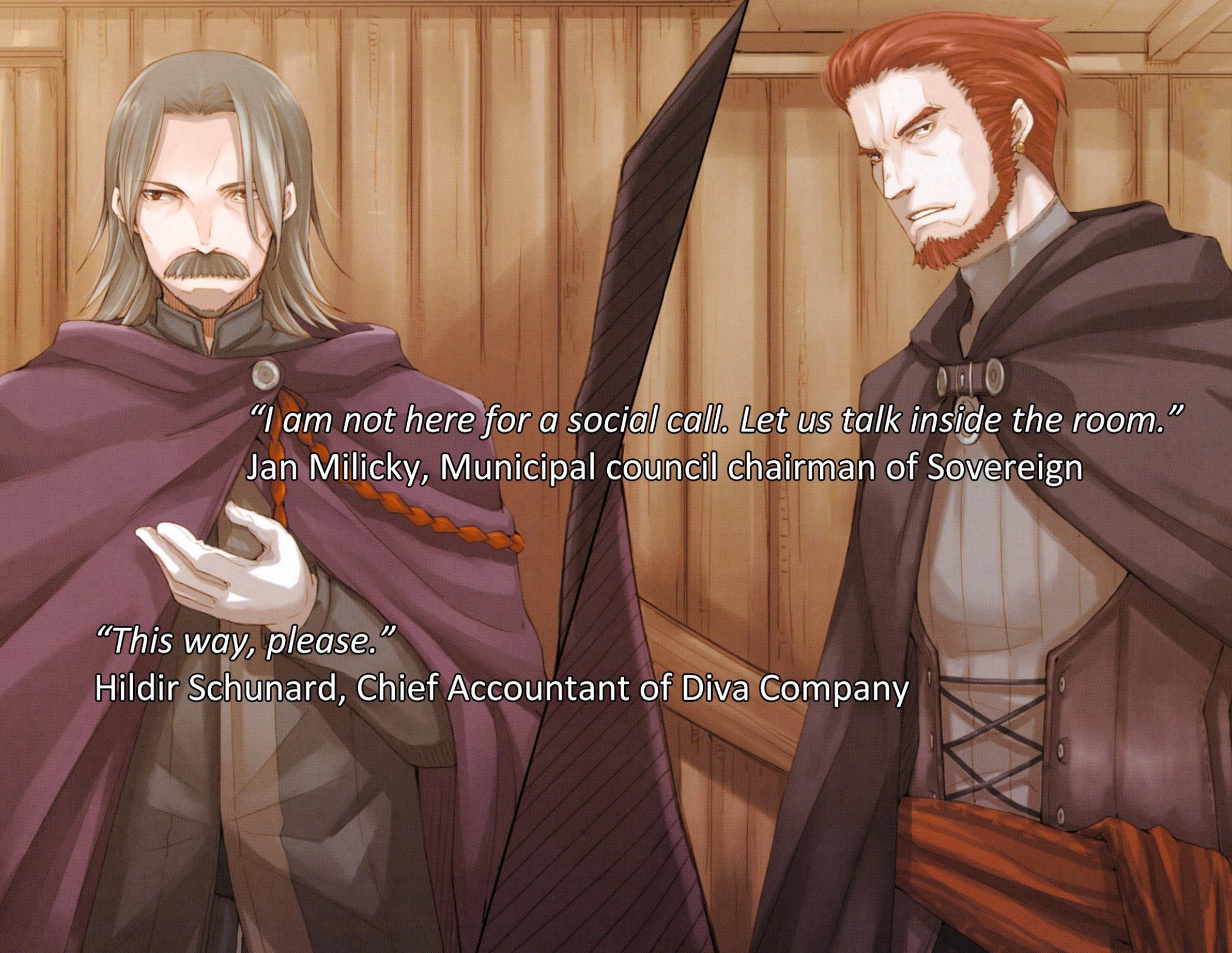
Moid Markus, staff sergeant of  
the Myuri Mercenary Band

*"Bring 'em down! Attack!"*  
Myuri Ruward, captain of  
the Myuri Mercenary Band



He took full advantage of that good chance and said,  
*"It's good to see you again."*

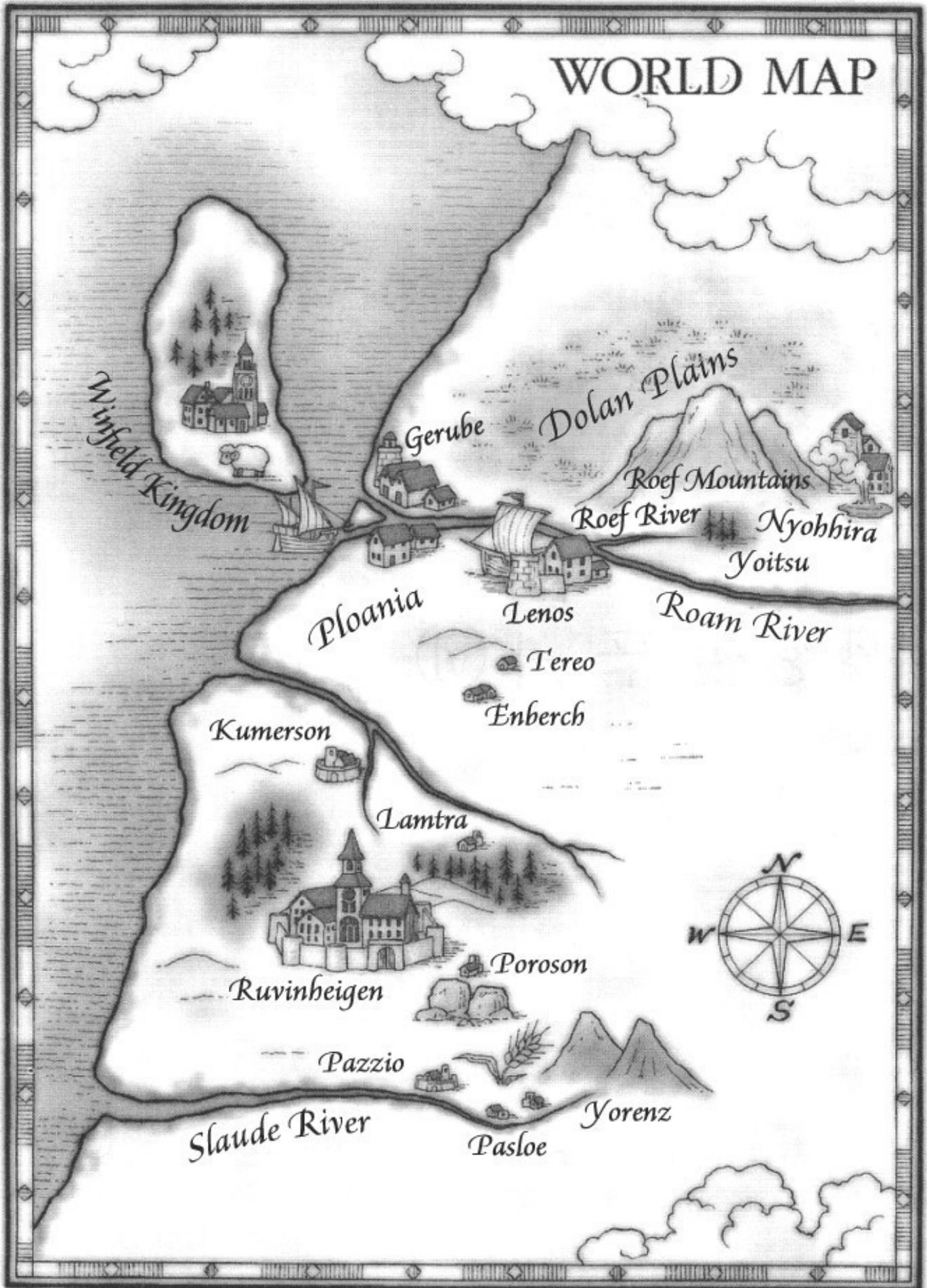
She finally looked up at him, and her face began to distort.



*"I am not here for a social call. Let us talk inside the room."*  
Jan Milicky, Municipal council chairman of Sovereign

*"This way, please."*

Hildir Schunard, Chief Accountant of Diva Company



Map illustration by Idemitsu Hidemasa

# 狼と香辛料 ㊦

太陽の金貨 〈下〉

# *Spice and Wolf*

Volume 16

**Solar Gold Coin II**

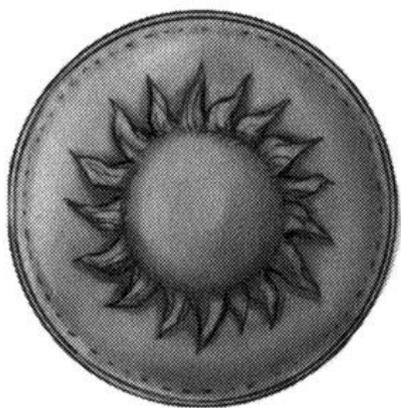
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第 六 幕



## Chapter 6

They both stared at that bag, knowing that it belonged to Cole, who should be far away in the town of Kinisen right now. Words like “thieves,” “brigands,” and “highwaymen” all flashed in their minds. The kinds of people Cole had no chance against. He couldn’t stand up to such violence.

This was just too much to take in right now. Lawrence couldn’t quite grasp what was going on. He looked up and saw a thin, cloaked man standing next to their table. He searched his memories, but knew nothing of the man. He didn’t even seem like the kind who was evil. Far from it, he actually seemed somehow elegant.

Saying nothing more, the man began walking away with the light footsteps of a goblin. Lawrence was still so shocked he didn’t even think to go after him. The only reason he got up was because Holo had taken one glance at the bag and jumped to her feet.

“Wait..”

That was all he could say. Holo glared back at him wrathfully, like she was looking at an enemy.

“There must be others with him.. can you sense them?”

Her eyes remained glued on his, her anger slowly cooling as he stared her down. She then began hyperventilating, unable to calm herself. Her shoulders shook and she struggled to contain her anger. It was like her lungs were bellows, at least until she somehow managed to steady her breathing.

“Can you sense them?”

He repeated his question. She shielded her eyes like she was about to faint, but managed to finally take a deep breath before glancing around.

“I cannot say, there may be no one else.”

Her fangs were gleaming.

“But that is *not* important.”

She was beyond rational thought at this point, so he nodded and brought the bag over to her.

“Then let’s confirm that this is really Cole’s.”

She threw the bag at him, having clearly detected Cole’s scent upon it. Her nose would not be

mistaken about that. The bag seemed to be his, and within it were his usual things; bits of cloth, the certificates he had purchased, and what little cash he carried. It was hardly worth robbing, so now they knew that this wasn't a simple robbery. More importantly, these people knew Holo's identity.

"Shall we give chase?"

His question earned a smile.

"They shan't escape, even if we must chase them to the ends of the earth."

Her confident strides gave the impression that she was born to play this part. It was midnight, but the town was still bustling. It had turned into quite a slurred atmosphere, with people hardly capable of stringing together words anymore. There was no longer any telling which of the puddles on the ground were spilled beer and which were urine.

Lawrence recalled a tale about a priest being lead through hell by a saint. On their tour, they had also watched people who had fallen to the seven sins crying their sorrows to the world, seen flowers of lava, and even the mature fruit of the body of a prostitute that had not noticed her own demise.

Lesco, a town managed by Diva company, had no strict rules or regulations. Sin was rampant on every street right now. Even the beautiful moon and stars of winter were bashfully hiding themselves behind the clouds. Were a bird to fly overhead, they might marvel at the flames dancing beneath them.

Mere minutes ago, the hopes and ambitions of this place were all that Lawrence could see. Yet now, at the very moment that Cole's bag had been flung onto the table before him, that spell was broken. He held Holo's hand as they weaved their way through the endless drunks in this town built by Diva's precise wisdom and kindness. He was still proud of Diva's accomplishments, but now he could see the darkness they had also "built."

Holo suddenly hummed, then stopped at the entrance of an alley. Lawrence peered into it, but because of the fires around them all he could see was darkness. It seemed so black as to have no end. It was the very model of a trap.

"If they believe I shall yield, they are sorely mistaken."

She pulled the small pouch of wheat from its resting place around her neck, making it clear that she would make no pretense of kindness. She then dove into that darkness with no trace of fear, leaving Lawrence to follow her with the bag slung over his shoulders.

Such alleys inevitably appeared as towns grew, in the cracks between the houses that dotted the roads. They would be filled with goods and tools, and piles of firewood that seemed to be

there taking shelter from the sun and rain. In the day, they only added to the sense of hope and liveliness of the town, but at night these snowy paths felt more like the back stages of a grand play.

Lawrence swallowed his emotions and did his best to follow Holo closely. Soon they spied another square of the town, with a well that seemed to be surrounded by buildings. Once those buildings were completed and filled with life, this would be another lovely spot to relax during the sunlight hours, but right now, with construction materials strewn about, it felt more like a refugee camp for war survivors.

And yet, those eerie sights were not the ones that stole their attention. No, that would be a rabbit, which Lawrence first assumed had managed to escape some butcher shop, only to wonder why it made no movements as they approached. Soon, he realized that it was no ordinary rabbit; from the light in its eyes, Lawrence could tell that it also understood the words of humans. Holo took a deep breath, as though to keep herself from pouncing on the creature.

“I have no fear of bringing sadness to the owner of that bag.”

It spoke, and left an elegant first impression at that.

“And yet, he has suffered no injury. I would prefer avoiding that, if at all possible.”

Only Holo would be able to judge whether this was really happening. All Lawrence could do was try to keep the situation calm.

“What are you after?”

Not money, certainly. Not if it could talk, and knew of Holo.

“My colleagues spotted the two of you, wondering what a wolf might be doing with a merchant, and then let their curiosity get the best of them.”

“And what did they discover?”

Lawrence spoke sincerely, and the rabbit’s ears perked up.

“A banned book, which I require.”

It was plausible, albeit surprising, that they had been monitored ever since they were in Lenos, in order to deliver Cole’s bag to them now.

“..why?”

“To be frank, I do not wish to become your enemy.”

It ignored Lawrence's question in an attempt to placate Holo. She already seemed to be preparing to pounce at the first possible moment, gripping her wheat pouch tightly. The rabbit's eyes were on Lawrence, but it was talking to both of them.

"The lands of the north are in danger."

Lawrence took a deep breath, now realizing that his hunch had been correct: the banned book was not only the cause for all of this, but also the key to its solution.

"With the book, I can prevent this."

A reasonable thing to say, and well-articulated. Clearly, this rabbit was leadership material. And yet, given that the buttons on Cole's bag were torn off, it was clear that no amount of careful wording could gloss over the fact that Cole had been threatened. Perhaps, the next time they met, it would be Cole's head that was flung onto the table before him.

"Who are you?"

What the rabbit replied surprised Lawrence.

"Hildir Schunard, the financial officer of Diva company."

The financial officer was the most important assistant a company's owners had. His was a position of vital importance to a company that was capable of issuing its own currency, like a nation might. In simple terms, his position, were they actually a nation, would be that of prime minister.

It wasn't possible to rule out whether he spoke lies, and when Lawrence looked to Holo she was standing quietly. He swallowed again, and took three more deep breaths before turning himself into a merchant once more.

"Then, Mr. Hildir, why exactly do you need this banned book?"

"I understand your doubts, and I also understand your goal."

If they had been watched since Lenos, then the net had been cast wide enough to catch such small details.

"But still, when all is said and done, there is no way I will answer anything related to said book."

Hildir claimed to be the financial officer of Diva company, but it was hardly a claim he had legitimized. Regardless, Lawrence wasn't under the impression that he was lying. Hildir was not making a request of Holo to borrow Lawrence's abilities, but simply because he needed that book.

He had even dared to fling that bag next to Holo, knowing full well that such an action could have killed him. Hence this gamble was more important to him than his own life. He was prepared. Lawrence could therefore ask him again.

“May I ask what the problem is?”

Hildir stopped breathing at that moment, and spoke with a begrudging tone that betrayed his inability to control the situation.

“There are presently two factions in our company, and I am a member of the weaker.”

“..And?”

Lawrence knew to shoot back as quickly as possible, even if he couldn’t hide his own nervousness. If Diva was a company divided, then things may be dire indeed.

“I suspect that you had already deduced our intent to issue a new currency.”

“I had. And an excellent idea, I might add. It will benefit all involved.”

“Indeed.”

This town’s beacon of prosperity could not illuminate such a dark alley, and all one would see if they looked up right now was the ominous red flow of flames.

“In fact, when all is said and done, we shall earn *too* much.”

Too much? What an odd thing to say.. Lawrence found himself thrown off entirely.



“Too.. much?”

“Verily. When we decided to issue our new currency, we knew it would be highly valued. The moneychangers have even already assigned it a high rate.”

Of course, people would have already begun to speculate on the future currency. It was declared to have a ridiculous purity, but one that people could trust would be sustainable. Such coins would be in tremendous demand, so moneychangers would compensate with higher exchange rates, so speculators would not ruin things in the name of profit.

“Our first instinct was to be happy, but it will not benefit many people - especially the barons who will have to cover for the exchange rate. Even the ones who have already earned so much from this plan. The moment they noticed what was happening, they demanded a simple solution.”

“For the bank to issue more money?”

Hildir nodded and sighed.

“It is indeed a simple and profitable solution.”

“One that will put the north in danger?”

Lawrence tried to lead the conversation, but Hildir suddenly broke eye contact with him. Was he overdoing it? He was a bit surprised to see sadness appear in Hildir’s eyes, like he hated himself for this. He had ears that looked like wings, but he was chained to the ground. He turned back to Lawrence, who didn’t really care if it was just an act.

“All coins are made of metal, and the moneychangers have already hoarded nearly all of the coins we’ve minted. They’re effectively useless now, and we can’t just issue more. But we’re merchants, we have to do everything we can. I’m sure you can tell what the simplest solution is from that much.”

Lawrence’s heart sank, indeed realizing what he meant.

“Conquering more land for mines.”

“But of course. The northern lands trade very little, but that does not mean they are poor. Our backers have been pushing us to attack them. In fact, many barons have closed their doors to our plans, and so the ones who have joined us openly see that as an opportunity, rather than a problem.”

There was spite in his voice. Clearly, Diva company had not wished to do this. He spoke as though the barons were parasites. This flew in the face of Lawrence’s suspicion that Diva was a

company large enough to pull their strings, which could only mean one thing.

“..Meaning that there are some in your company who support this kind of crass action.”

“Precisely. Stopping all of this will require the banned book.”

Lawrence flinched in revulsion. He was close to throwing up. This was hardly an unfamiliar concept to him, it was a regular way of thinking for the nobility. God was laughing at all of them. Hildir calmly continued, speaking as though he had been dining with the Devil.

“Their minds are set, even if they will not say it directly. They are already making excuses, such as suddenly becoming pessimistic that our existing mines will be sufficient for this plan.”

Merchants were always good at rooting out excuses to justify their cheap behavior.

“Of course that would mean they have the impetus to delay our plan, or open new mines. It has become a complicated political problem, since a strong company can easily take over an existing mine, or even take over some metal-rich land to open a new one. Some can see nothing but benefits to this idea.”

The desire for huge potential gains always clashed with equally negative consequences for others, and in this case none of those others could stand up to Diva. Myuri had made it painfully clear that was the case with the mercenaries supporting them. Diva had the money, and that was all they needed to emerge as the victor in any such war.

Considering Diva would win not only land and new mines, but would also force more people to back their new currency, this was a problem that could only keep growing as exchange increased. They would be strong enough to suck every drop of blood from the people around them. They were like the mythical snake that ate so much its lungs couldn't expand, and finally died.. except that Diva had no lungs to limit them.

“With the book, I can rob them of their willful excuse that our mines will run out. We'll need no new mines, and can even reopen old ones that have since been closed. Many barons would also be happy to sell any such useless mines they own, so I'm sure you can see that this is all in the best interest of the north.”

With new advances in mining, a mine that had “run out” could spring back to life, and give these people the money they craved. Neither Lawrence nor Holo had to think it over to see how it would benefit the situation.

“Money can solve most any problem now, and it will only be able to solve more of them in the future. The age of bloody wars needs to end. If the Moon-Hunting Bear has taught us anything, it is that the age of power is long gone.”

Hildir suddenly stopped talking and leaned in closer, but Holo only stood her ground quietly. Lawrence understood that it was up to him to speak on her behalf.

“Are you the only one backing this idea?”

This rabbit almost gave the impression that he was struggling on his own in the company. If that were true, all Lawrence would be doing by handing over the book would be adding fuel to the fire. A merchant couldn't take such a stupid risk. Hildir's answer, however, was immediate.

“No. Our owner, Hilbert von Diva, is of the same mind.”

The company's very owner was in the weaker party. Something like that might seem ridiculous, but Lawrence didn't think so. The company was far too large to be under one person's control. Division of labor was inevitable. Even a faction of powerful workers could best their boss, and Lawrence had even heard of owners being taken hostage for being overly stubborn. Who could tell how much of a company like Diva would be consumed by the flames of greed?

“So please, help us stop these malcontents before our company becomes an invader. Not even the Church can stand up to such power; the flames will consume this entire land. I do not want to be part of a company that would open the gates to hell. You have fallen under the spell of this town yourself, no? That is the true dream of Diva company, which is now being destroyed!”

His words mournfully trailed off into the sky. Many people had woven this thread of dreams into a tapestry, and Lawrence could certainly understand why they would take pride in that. The age of power was ending, and what remained of that power was fast becoming the responsibility of humans. Merchants just so happened to be ending up with most of that power, because they were like Lawrence: they were dreamers. Diva company was a good example of that.

“I am but a rabbit, as you plainly see, yet I wish to see that dream come to fruition. Building a free kingdom? Where no one is restricted, and people use their wisdom and hard work to succeed? To dream of bringing peace to an unstable land? That is worth my life to me, so much so that I would even stand like this before a wolf.”

He turned to Holo.

“I cannot let this dream end here.”

Then.. he had never planned to kill Cole.. or maybe he couldn't? Why hadn't he coerced or threatened Lou Loah directly, instead of taking Cole hostage and risking his life in front of Holo like this? There had to be a reason..

His long ears twitched as he stared at the speechless Holo, his head tilted.

“When this is over, I will reward you greatly. The two of you wish to stay here and open a shop, yes? Then I, the financial officer of Diva company, will give you my support.”

The fact that he didn’t say the support would be financial implied that he intended to do even better than that.

“We are out of time. This time, Diva company is gambling with more lives than ever. I must assume that you understand the meaning of the phrase ‘seize the moment.’ That is why while the rest of the people in my faction are still holed up in the company, I have run out to do this on my own.”

Hildir fidgeted and raised his paw as he sat at the edge of the well, looking like something straight out of a fairy tale.

“The one with the keys to the locks cannot be caged, but please think this over. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement. I shall return here tomorrow evening for your answer.”

He then quickly leaped away and scurried off, vanishing in the cracks in the buildings. Lawrence instinctively wanted to give chase, but Holo stopped him. He quickly noticed it was because there was a red glow approaching them from the other end of the alley.

“Oh? Were you two just having a bit of fun?”

It was three men, armed with spears, possibly town guards.

“Jeez. If some drunks followed you, we’d have even more work on our hands. Go home please.”

The man who spoke shooed them away with a wave of his hand. Lawrence had no desire to argue, so he pushed Holo’s shoulder and led her away. The guards watched their backs for a while, but soon left. It was soon so dark without the men’s torches that Lawrence couldn’t even see Holo. He intentionally slowed down, but she did something unexpected: she gripped his hand tightly.

“I do not think he is lying.”

He didn’t have to guess that she was talking about the banned book.

“He was painfully clear about where we stand.”

There were many looking to start a war that would profit them. They were even attempting to legitimize their actions by claiming their mines were nearly exhausted. With the banned book, that claim would be null and void; the mines would continue to be productive, and their theory made impractical. At least, that was Hildir’s hope.

“What are your thoughts?”

“I-”

Lawrence stopped, unable to continue until he had sorted out just what his thoughts were.

“If this was purely for my own benefit, I would accept Hildir’s suggestion. I share Diva’s dream, and if a war breaks out I will end up earning nothing. The moment I reached my hand into that fire for the treasures within, I would become nothing but cinders.”

Myuri had also claimed he wouldn’t attack Lesco. If that was the case, what would an attacker like him do when he himself was under attack in this wall-less town? Would people like him truly stay and fight, or would they flee?

“If we give him the book, we might avert that danger.”

“Then just do so, if those are your thoughts.”

She replied softly, leaving Lawrence even more shocked.

“Wait.. this should be your decision. I mean, it has to do with your homeland, and I don’t gather you actually agree with Hildir, do you?”

She didn’t reply at once, so it was obvious how conflicted she was.

“..after all, someone like you can still make a difference. Hildir has his agenda, but it’s not entirely against our own. Better if closed mines are reopened than new lands being destroyed.. that’s true, isn’t it?”

Lawrence was trying to justify giving away the banned book. The situation seemed hopeless whether they did so or not. Things would likely end up the same way, one way or the other, so they had to make the most reasonable choice for everyone’s hopes to be met. Holo had to have a reason for just passing the problem off to him like that.

“Is there a reason you’re so against making the choice?”

She trembled when she heard his challenge. She’d never let him decide anything important on his own before, so he had to wonder if she was just giving up, or trying to avoid something unpleasant. Which was it?

“You don’t trust him, do you? Is it that in your mind he’s just an incapable bunny, since he took such a roundabout route to get to us? No, he has to be capable if he’s the financial officer of a company like Diva.. so I can’t imagine that being it..”

Lawrence didn’t feel that Hildir was lying. It wasn’t the time to consider whether he could actually convince his peers to stop the war, but that was a future problem.

“Maybe you just don’t want to place your trust in Diva? I can sort of see that, since they’re complete strangers, and they’re spreading so many rumours..”

He was trying to dig for the answer, and it worried him that he had to do so. Holo simply remained silent. She held his wrist, but her lips were sealed. He suppressed his urge to sigh and wondered what else it could be. Why was she staying silent? Just as he was getting nervous that he’d run out of possibilities, he found one more.

“Or is it because you’re worried they’ll hurt Cole?”

They did hand back his bag, which showed signs that Cole had been put through some sort of violence. But then, Hildir had specifically said he didn’t intend to harm Cole. Holo had to believe him, otherwise she would have certainly sunk her fangs into him. But she had resisted, which implied her trust. He wouldn’t hurt Cole, even if they didn’t hand over the book. That meant he had a code, and wouldn’t kill innocent people.

“What have I missed?”

He’d finally arrived at the inevitable conclusion that Holo would benefit from Hildir’s suggestion. Lawrence had to assume so. It was also a great opportunity for him, since he would gain standing in the town. His benefits extended beyond just getting a nice shop at a cheap price. And on top of that, he wouldn’t end up like Eve if he opened a shop with Holo.

And yet, he couldn’t help but gaze at Holo like she was a child calmly asking for money. She wasn’t a child, of course, and would speak whenever she felt it necessary for situations to end up favorably. In fact, she had opened her mouth several times, but only ended up breathing through it. Finally, she squeezed out some words.

“If we hand over the book, the land will suffer more in the future.”

Lawrence’s eyes opened wide. He never suspected she was thinking in such basic terms.

“Yes, that’s certainly a possibility. But, if old mines can be made productive again, they will have no reason to build new ones. It would simply be pointless, since it is more cost-effective for them to reopen the old ones than dig up a new mountain. Plus, Hildir said it best: most problems can be solved with money. We have seen that on our trip over and over. In fact, there are merchants who invest in research to put old mines to use.”

Lawrence had finished his thought, but Holo remained silent.

“I must therefore conclude that we should first remove their motivation for occupying the north. I do want to support the dream of the merchants in this town, even if I understand why you’re concerned. After all, with a book of special techniques like that, Diva might get greedy

and try to open more mines. But-“

He stopped, now realizing that he was trying to convince Holo in order to rationalize having paid a deposit. He really was getting swept away by the fervor of Diva company’s dream.

If merchants ruled the world, they wouldn’t do so in ignorance, and stupid actions like war would become less common. Towns would be managed so trade would increase, because their motivated self-interest extended to the people in the town. It wasn’t just about fame and greed, and violent or opulent merchants tended not to make it very far in the business world.

On top of that, merchants weren’t prone to put on airs of wealth, like nobles did. They worked hard to earn their riches and left the acting to the nobles. Who was more fit to rule the world? That went without saying. Every place Lawrence had visited that thrived on trade was a lively and successful one. Hence his desire to support Diva.

If they handed the book to Hildir, it might lead to them opening more mines. But fearing that outcome was pointless, since it was bound to happen anyway.. why cut the tree of hope down before it had a chance to grow? Lawrence found himself wishing he could articulate his thoughts to Holo.

“I just don’t know why you’re saying this. You said you don’t care what Diva is doing.. that’s why you supported my choice to buy the shop, wasn’t it?”

Holo stopped moving altogether.

“Then if we don’t give them the book-“

“No.”

She finally spoke.

“No, that is not true.”

She was gripping his wrist very tightly and repeating “no” over and over. He was completely lost, wondering why she was acting like a child. Maybe she really was a child.. after repeating “no” for a while, she began crying. Her tears rained like a lost child’s as her shoulders trembled.

“What’s the matter? It might be a special book, but it’s hardly a book of magic spells. It may have them develop mines, but it’s not like it’ll give them the power to just open mines everywhere right away.”

“And in the longer term..?”

She looked up at Lawrence with eyes like those of a merchant being attacked by wolves in the dark.

“..well, this should stop them for a couple decades, at least. But it’s not like we can do anything to stop them in the longer term.”

Holo slowly took a deep breath, like she was getting ready to roar, or struggling to cope with hearing something so horrible - or maybe both. Her tears continued to spill as her mind calmed down.

“I.. could..”

“..huh?”

Her tears were making him emotional as well. He knew what she meant: she had other options, but couldn’t use them. Their destiny was to be unable to change anything.

“I could stop them.. I will live long enough.. but you will not be by my side. Do you think I can just stay with you as they destroy the forests, because I made the choice to let them? Do you think I can just let them flatten the mountains? I hate it! So very much! And you will be gone so soon.. and I will have to live on with my decision.. are you asking me to do that? You think I want to? You..”

She was pounding on his chest, and he received every blow until there was no strength behind them anymore. He could have avoided them, but if this way let her pass some of the pain on to him, he wanted to let her do so. She was staring at him so helplessly as she cried, finally realizing just how weak she was compared to the ravages of time. It almost looked like she was knocking on his chest to revive him, worried he would never wake up again.

“Without you here.. to help me.. tolerate it.. I.. I..”

She was struggling to see him past her tears and talk to him between her sobs.

“I am not strong enough..”

She finally grabbed his sleeve with her last ounce of strength, practically begging him to not leave her alone. He remembered the first time she had cried about being left alone, the first time he had drawn his dream shop during their travels. He knew this wasn’t an act. She wanted a place she could call home, because having a home made it easier to tolerate hardships.

If she was the one to decide, then she would feel that all of the subsequent centuries of mining were her responsibility. Whether it made sense or not, that was how she felt about it. Lawrence couldn’t be there with her for more than another fifty years, if he was lucky. A sudden illness might take him from her in less than a week.

Humans beings were like bubbles; if one was too afraid to pop them, they should hope they

never fall in love. That was what poets wrote, and what Holo feared. She had lived through so many experiences, and still couldn't bear falling in love. It was certainly a point of pride for Lawrence, as a man.

He stared at his hand for a moment, then back at her. She had just thrown away her pride as a Wisewolf, and was simply staring back at him. When he took her hand, she burst into tears once more, clearly knowing what he was going to say.

"Then don't make the decision."

He held her in his arms and whispered in her ear.

"You knew from the start that we had to give him the book, didn't you?"

She *did* know what he was going to say. It was the clearest moment they had ever shared. The only thing Lawrence had that she didn't was the spirit of a merchant - the spirit to never give up. She had been hoping for him to say this all along, and at least some of her tears were ones of shame for looking forward to it. It was for that reason that Lawrence, finally having something he could do for the one he loved the most, spoke with pride.

"I'm setting my foot down and giving the book to Hildir, for my own benefit. It's my choice, and you can't stop me. If there's a problem, I'll live with it. No regrets."

She looked up once more, with "I'm sorry" written plainly in her eyes.

"So, that's that. We're handing the book over to him. Hey, don't look away."

He grabbed her shoulders so she would look him in the eyes again. She was still in tears, and had never looked so unlike a Wisewolf. Perhaps there was really no such thing as a Wisewolf, and it was just some silly title made up by the people living around Yoitsu.

"We will continue on like we always have. Now, and in the future."

If she needed him to say this to get over her loneliness, then he would say it.

"So.. please stop crying already."

He wiped her tears, but fresh ones kept replacing them. He repeated himself.

"If you keep crying, I'll start having strange thoughts."

He gently smacked his hand on her cheek as she smiled, then laughed and coughed at his intentional joke. She cried on for a while, but he'd done all he had to do. She soon rubbed her face and dried it with her sleeve, and his job was done. He held his hand out to her.

“Let’s head back.”

She nodded hard as she took his hand.

~~~

Lawrence woke up first the next morning. Holo seemed to be utterly exhausted from crying. Her breathing almost seemed pained. She normally slept like a wolf, but today her head wasn’t even under her blanket. It was strange to see, but Lawrence understood that it was because she was with him. Her fear was that at any moment, he might no longer be with her. It was either that, or she was being honest about not wanting to make a decision.

But Lawrence was here for her now. He had been resolved ever since they parted ways with Cole. The look on her face as she watched Cole leave couldn’t be covered up, no matter how hard she smiled. She was tired of seeing people leave her behind. It would be great if they met again one day, of course, but she was beyond even considering such things. Hers was a profound exhaustion.

No matter how many people came and went, no one could turn back time. She had been watching people leave her whole life, and would continue to do so. With these thoughts, he caressed her face and finally got out of bed. He swung open the shutters and greeted the friendly sun’s warmth. The liveliness outside seemed wholly oblivious to the turmoil of the Diva company and the coming war.

Sadness could strike at any time and ruin everything, and all Lawrence could do was move on and weather such storms. He had to, if he wanted to be with Holo. The legends of those who were defeated were all miserable tales, and at this point Holo’s story had been one of those. And so, Lawrence made himself presentable, but left his jacket on the pillow beside Holo. It was cold, but he wanted her to know he would be back soon.

“How can I help you?”

Lawrence had gone to the third floor in order to find Moid, but it seemed like he’d just been entertaining his master a few moments ago. He greeted Lawrence with tired eyes, stinking of liquor.

“Hello, I was hoping we could talk.”

“Oh, but Myuri’s not here now.. uh, sorry, come in..”

He opened the door and let Lawrence in, then lifted a jug of water up and poured it over his head before shaking his head like a dog.

“Ugh.. damn.. can’t believe I’m drunk. Guess I’m getting old.”

“You guys sure do drink.”

“Heh, well, yeah.. it’s a bit embarrassing to admit it, but it’s a habit when you don’t know if you’re gonna live or die. At least, that’s our excuse.”

They were people who treated every drink as though it was their last. It wasn’t necessarily an excuse either, so they drank like they’d never heard the word “sober.”

“You were looking for the captain, yes?”

He ran his hand through the needle-like spikes of his hair, still able to give off a strong impression at his age. He must have been quite dashing in his youth.

“Yeah.. he had to take off?”

“He’s probably gone to see Reginald.. ah, I mean the Hugo Mercenaries. He’s known them for a long time, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s drinking more over there.”

It comforted Lawrence to hear that a mercenary like him was just like most other people, wanting to have friends and drinking buddies.

“If it’s important I could have someone go find him.”

Lawrence hesitated, and Moid picked up on it. He put on the mannerisms of a determined warrior.

“Unless you think I could help you instead?”

He was the eldest member of their team, and normally Lawrence would have to talk to him instead of the captain.

“Of course, of course.. but I’m worried that if I talk to you first, Mr. Ruward might blame himself for being out drinking at such a crucial time.”

Lawrence was a bit worried that Moid would be too drunk to realize what he meant, but that proved untrue.

“I’ll have someone find him immediately. A moment, please.”

He passed Lawrence and walked out into the corridor, then bellowed so loudly the foundations of the inn shook.

“We have orders!!!”

~~~~

It was the Almighty who granted barons the authority to rule the land, and so knights swore their loyalty to them. They were normally the representatives of God who decided whether a quiet forest or field would be burned until nothing but tears remained. And yet, it was Diva company running this town, a godless organization of factions. If they deposed their leader, the mercenaries who pledged their allegiance could only benefit.

“Well well.”

Myuri had waltzed back with two youths in tow, looking very much like their older sibling. He wiped his face with a warm towel and continued.

“What’s all this about?”

Like the gears of a great watermill, Myuri's men gathered intelligence that they hoped was accurate. Otherwise, the wheel that drove their organization would grind to a halt. It meant life or death to them, and their life was Lawrence's loss.

“Do you know Hildir Schunard?”

Myuri glanced over at Moid, who in turn replied to Lawrence.

“Diva’s financial secretary, the owner’s right-hand man.”

“According to Holo’s ears, that was who we just met.”

Holo’s ears might as well be infallible. She was ancient, and her ears had never failed her. Myuri stared at the towel in his hands like it was a sword covered in blood.

“My sources tell me Diva’s having some kind of trouble. Internal trouble.”

Myuri’s attendant reached out to take his towel, but Myuri let it hang over his shoulder after wiping his face.

“Issuing a new currency is no mean feat, and the profits involved are dizzying. I can’t help but feel like we’ve been used, and expertly so, but still..”

“Word is that the company head and most of his supporters are being kept in their headquarters.”

Moid and Myuri froze still, with an expression on their faces like someone had just hollered that food was on sale.

“But their ambition can’t be contained.”

Myuri laughed when he heard that, but he was laughing at them.

“Fools. Did they think they were bears just because they wore their fur? Or maybe they figured they could act like southern nobility just because they had the money? Well, not here in the north. Even the Church has to bow its head here. They don’t even know what they’ve started. Did they honestly think they could contain a war that easily? What a bunch of bumpkins.”

The roads on the map hanging on the wall looked almost like a spider’s web dangling between the mountains. And that wasn’t even counting small roads like the one Lawrence had taken on the far south of the Ploanian plains. The map only marked the main roads in the north, those important lines that cut through forests and mountains. It was the kind of map used to decide how to allocate up one’s forces when they would be spread so thin that even a traveling merchant like Lawrence would feel isolated.

“And that’s all he told you?”

Lawrence wondered if Myuri and Moid were contemplating who else they should tell. Perhaps they were already planning ahead, and trying to determine which directions the war might take. They were looking at one another while Myuri spoke with Lawrence.

“No, he also asked for my help to turn the tide.”

Myuri finally looked at Lawrence.

“Your help?”

One’s choice of allies would determine whether they would survive the coming war.

“All I can do, though, is give him a powerful tool, something which should be in Lenos right now.”

“Hmm..”

Myuri crossed his arms, but Moid looked up.

“And what powerful tool might that be?”

“Something I came across while trading. A banned book about special mining techniques.”

Their faces were still stony, giving off the impression that they never flinched while discussing important news. It was the kind of mannerism of someone who felt that showing their nervousness would be their downfall, no matter how silly they looked trying to hide it.

“Originally, Holo and I wanted that book dealer to hide it on a shelf in the south forever, but

right now it should be on its way to Kinisen in the east.”

“Kinisen? Even with the fastest horse it would take us a week to get there..”

Myuri spoke as if talking to himself, but it was obviously directed at Moid.

“However, I was just handed the bag of one of the persons who was traveling with that merchant. Hildir told us he was given the bag after talking with their party, but the truth is never so straightforward. That was how he asked for our help.”

“In other words, he is threatening you.”

“And yet, he did so to show his determination. He is doing this knowing that he too may die, so it is quite unlikely that he is lying.”

Myuri nodded. He knew Holo’s true form.

“I see.”

He looked up and continued.

“Then Hildir isn’t human either..”

“Exactly.”

Lawrence nodded, considering Myuri worthy of his trust, but Myuri’s face remained stony for quite some time.

“Really..”

He whispered and cast his eyes downward after hearing that from Lawrence. He stared at the edge of his desk as if trying to come to terms with everything.

“We’ve decided to hand the book over to him. Tonight we will tell him so.”

“Does he have any chance of winning?”

Myuri’s immediate question made it clear just how sharp and practical he was.

“I believe he does.”

The larger an organization was the harder it was to control their greed. Given how quickly they were moving, it was clear that they never expected to be in a position to control the network of barons and issue a new currency. It all came down to money, which could make even the smallest person have grand dreams. It was only the people who could still sincerely say

something like “please think it over” who deserved consideration in the first place.

“Then you want us to run, Mr. Lawrence?”

A gear would turn the others around it, and Myuri’s mind was now spinning furiously. Lawrence nodded.

“Yes. If Hildir fails, we will all be in danger. Even someone as unimportant as I have things they want to protect and, well, let’s just say that it will take longer to convince your group to head in another direction.”

There was absolutely no way to call it “retreat” in front of the leader of a mercenary band.

“True. It does take time to change our direction, and even more to retreat.”

Myuri smiled.

“I’ll try to not be stubborn.”

Lawrence’s choice of words just made Myuri feel worse.

“Heading in another direction..”

He smiled as he repeated the words.

“But then, what if we poured cold water on this fire? You’ve been in molding refineries, haven’t you Mr. Lawrence?”

Lawrence could only say no. He’d seen many a mold at blacksmiths’, but never the kind that Myuri was probably talking about that were like small hills unto themselves.

“It takes five or six men to fan the flames for the furnace alone, which is like some great siege machine. It roars and sighs like the Devil himself, and the flames shoot up into the sky. Even if someone were to pour cold water on those flames, it wouldn’t go out.. it would just burst into an even greater explosion of flames.”

True, throwing water onto flames didn’t always extinguish them; the more extreme a situation was, the more extreme the blowback could be.

“They’re too far gone, so of course stopping them won’t be easy. You feel the sting of it too, right? This is beyond even the hottest stove. I have nothing but respect for anyone who wants to try pouring water on those flames, but the price of failure is just too great.”

Myuri looked up again.

“I understand, Mr. Lawrence, I wasn’t trying to convince you, just talking out loud. We’ve already been preparing to leave anyway, so we’ll just end up doing so a bit sooner than expected. Besides, there are still so many wines I haven’t sampled.. it’s too soon for me to settle down.”

That was quite a Holo-esque way to put it. Lawrence wondered if everyone from Yoitsu was a heavy drinker. They shook hands firmly.

“I’ll leave some of my best men to watch for you, so look for them as you run. They’ll wait for you on the way to Yoitsu, so you can find the best paths to take eastward.”

So he had been planning on delivering them to Yoitsu - he really was a chivalrous sort for a mercenary. Lawrence spoke his thanks and tightened his grip on their handshake.

“We’ll have to move quietly, while it’s still calm. We still have to pack. Moid, how’re we doing for goods and such?”

“We’ve enough for at least two days.”

“Gather up for five days as fast as possible. We’ll need to make them last for seven. Pay in silver, not gold.”

Given that the new currency was linked to Trenni silver coins, they would be expensive right now. Gold coins would be cheap, so only a fool would use them by comparison. Myuri was right on the ball; clearly he wasn’t just a simple fighter. In fact, Lawrence would love to work with him if he ever quit being a mercenary.

“The Myuri Mercenaries will move with the morning fog.”

He smiled, and Moid followed suit.

“Roger.”

~~~

Lawrence stretched. He’d at least ensured the safety of the mercenaries who had succeeded the name of Holo’s friend. If Hildir failed, Lawrence might end up being exposed and killed. When war began, people often slaughtered pigs to rouse their anger. If mercenaries were the ones doing that, everyone else would tremble in fear.

“Now it is all on you.”

Having just then cried madly, her face was swollen and rather unbecoming. And yet, she was stuck to Lawrence as she nibbled on some bread, listening to him and feigning disinterest. In spite of her appearance he could tell she was embarrassed, but he had no idea how to reconcile

that with the lovely image of her he had in his mind.

“Oh, what?”

Her eyes pierced his, staring right through him. He was now embarrassed as well, knowing what the question marks on her face implied.

“What will you do about the shop?”

She finally managed to ask the question that had to be asked.

“I don’t know how things will turn out.. but you’re the one who’s always saying that adversity breeds character.”

He didn’t say that he finally understood what was meant by the phrase “those who find something worth protecting are doomed to be in sad stories.” If Hildir failed, it was just too risky for him to keep the shop. Holo had also come to understand just how tricky and expensive it was to open a shop, which was why she was fussing so much.

“You paid your money to achieve your dream.. and no one loves money more than you do.”

She was clearly worried, but she couldn’t hide the tinge of spite in her voice at the last part. A familiar smile crept onto his face, but it wasn’t due to displeasure.

“Well, I only paid a deposit.”

When they sat next to one another like this, the difference in their heights was all but gone. That made it difficult for him to be on the receiving end of her glare, so he ultimately crumbled and gave her a clear answer.

“I can really only sell it.”

Selling the store wouldn’t be a problem if Hildir succeeded; Lawrence might even end up with two shops in the end. But if Hildir failed, and Lawrence somehow survived, this town would be a shadow of its former self. No one would pin their wartime hopes on a place with no wall. A mythical king might be able to emerge from such a thing unscathed, but Lesco was far from such glory.

The barons weren’t opposed to the war, because it could only earn them more. It was ridiculous for them to imagine it going so smoothly, but Lawrence couldn’t join them in their gamble - he stood to lose what he treasured the most if he failed. There was no other way to put it.

Holo had made up her mind when she let him buy his shop. She wouldn’t overthink things or act brashly any more, even if the northern lands were in trouble. It was the least Lawrence

could do to follow her lead.

“That said..”

“Hmm?”

She peeked at him to urge him on.

“It feels quite indescribable to sell my shop before I ever even opened it.”

With Lesco changing, his plan to begin a new adventure as a town merchant had fizzled. He couldn't be part of those changes. All he could do was cut his losses and move on. It wasn't disappointment or shame that he felt, but a bucket of cold water dowsing his hopes.

“I regret that as well, but you know to not be tied down by the past.”

It was rare for Holo to say something that hit so close to home for her. After all, she was always looking behind her to find signs of her past, and had learned many lessons from doing so. To hear her saying that meant she hoped he would indeed move on. He realized all of that, of course, but there were still things that puzzled him.

“Too true.. but still..”

“..what?”

He gently slid his hand across her face, which still betrayed how many questions she wanted to ask. He ignored her fidgeting - from her tail's happy wagging it was clear she wasn't angry - and hugged her like he would never let her go.

“..we're always turning around to face the past.”

He remembered how she had crawled into his wagon on that fateful night. This wolf had told him she wanted to go back to Yoitsu, and if she hadn't he would never have come this far.

“Then fortune will never come to you. Fool.”

With that she broke free of his arms. She was right, of course, but it went both ways.

“Just like pain will never stop following you.”

She laughed, and as he rested his chin on her head her tail began to happily wag again.

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That night, after Lawrence had sold his shop without any regrets, Hildir appeared in their room.

Right on schedule. He had again assumed the form of a rabbit, this time with no clothes at all. In a town with such a hectic and celebratory atmosphere, a rabbit would have less chance of survival than in a forest.

“I’ve been looking forward to your reply.”

He seemed thinner, and his dry-sounding voice was now positively hoarse. It was clear just how hard he was working to manage the conflict in his company. It felt like this chapter of his life would be the longest one in his book. Lawrence looked straight at this un-rabbit-like rabbit and replied.

“We have decided to give you the book.”

A shiver ran through Hildir’s tiny body.

“..”

His red eyes were locked onto them, but he was frozen and couldn’t speak. Even his ears were motionless. Lawrence was concerned that he might have been shocked to death. Maybe the situation really *was* that hopeless.

Lawrence had no idea how cruel fate had been to Hildir and his compatriots, but he was getting the image of Diva plotting and scheming away in their building, much like Eve had done. He felt happy to be able to help them, and doubly so that he might earn something for it. Those thoughts were swimming through his mind as Hildir took a breath much larger than his tiny body should be able to contain.



“You have my utmost thanks.”

Hildir spoke like a light was now shining on him from above. His efforts to convince the others might finally work with the book.

“Having said that, the book dealer who has it doesn’t live by the same code that we do.”

What became of the north might not matter to Lou Loah in the slightest. Just because Lawrence chose to help Diva by giving them the book didn’t mean that they could cry or beg Lou into caring.

“I can pay in cash.”

Hildir was cutting to the chase.

“How much?”

“Three hundred Lumione. I have it set aside at my place in town.”

Not even Holo would be able to tell if that was a lie. Still, Hildir was the financial officer of a company capable of challenging even the northern barons, so it wasn’t a stretch for him to have that much. In fact he seemed the type to have set aside such money in case the owner of the company was beset by such problems. Even royal families declined, and sometimes relied on the help of an excellent supporter who had prepared like that.

“Well that’s more than enough, but there’s one other issue.”

“Which is?”

Despite being a rabbit, Hildir enunciated clearly and elegantly. Lawrence wondered if he assumed that form so he would feel more comfortable talking to him. Under all of that fur, he was probably actually quite confident.

“What to do if your plan fails, and the book has lost its intended purpose.”

Lawrence carefully enunciated his reply, to make sure it was clear. Hildir looked him over, as did Holo. She *was* the one who would feel the most responsible if the book was misused, after all. Lawrence had to make sure he could prevent that.

“Very well then. Should I fail, we will try to take it back. If necessary, I will even return it to you in secret.”

Holo breathed in deeply when she heard that.

“You have our thanks.”

Lawrence replied for her, knowing that she really didn't want Diva to have the book in the first place. To her this cause was worth what a thousand Lumione would be to him.

"Then, how do we get the book in Kinisen?"

"That book dealer is cunning, and values righteousness. He may be the toughest person to ask for kindness."

Hildir nodded, his red eyes clearly showing that he had no intent to stupidly beg for someone to save him.

"A letter would take too long; we are almost out of time. This may be our own internal affair, but the barons have been scheming to try to find a successor."

"Then they mean to replace your boss soon?"

"Yes, they will seize power by any means."

For power, parents could kill their children and vice versa. Some people had an affinity for such things, to the point where they might even be able to frighten God Himself. And yet, their behavior could be rationalized. Nobles were always trying to seize control of companies.

"One of my friends is a bird. I believe his wings would be fastest, but he could at most carry that bag, perhaps."

Suddenly it made sense; if that bird were to snatch Cole's bag as they rested on the plain, it wouldn't seem like it was out of the ordinary at all. It happened all the time.

"I am hoping that Miss Holo can run."

Finally, Hildir had turned his attention to Holo. She only sighed in response.

"..And your other choice?"

"Please don't take it so badly."

While in their human forms they might seem like equals, but not all of Holo's contemporaries had the powers she had. Hildir clearly did not, nor his avian friend.

"I do not intend to. I do sometimes wish to run free on the land in my true form, after.."

She rose from the bed as Hildir nodded, glad to have the help of a capable ally.

"How long might it take you?"

“I know not.. I do not know the distance.”

Hildir’s face contorted, making it clear that money nor weapons mattered now, only time.

“Which is further from here? Lenos or Kinisen?”

Lawrence did his best to help. Hildir’s ears perked up.

“On a fast horse, it takes twice as long as going to Lenos.”

“Are the road conditions worse?”

“More or less.”

That didn’t really matter to Holo, but Lawrence still asked. She replied, obviously annoyed.

“If I do not rest, it will take one and a half days, so three or four days there and back.”

Hildir nodded again, quite resolutely.

“Your bird may weep for his wings.”

“Of course, it’s shameful.”

Holo frowned. The word “optimism” just wasn’t in her vocabulary, but her estimates wouldn’t be off.

“Just look at me, obeying a rabbit. Should my old friends have seen this, I would be a laughing stock. My, how the world has changed. Before I would have barged into that company with my fangs bared in open threat, but these days I cannot simply solve problems like that.. can I?”

Holo wasn’t so simple-minded as to think that violence would solve all problems. She knew that everything in the world was connected, and balance had to be maintained. Huge claws weren’t capable of controlling the world, only small and careful fingers were.

Had she not traveled to the Winfield kingdom she might never have helped Hildir, but now the sight of Huskins fighting to save his home was fresh in her mind. His legend as the golden sheep was still spoken, but he had long since become a servant to the humans. And yet, he had still not given up.

Holo’s complicated expression hinted that she was thinking of such things, but after another deep breath that expression vanished. She was still capable of growth.

“I have no clue how much convincing it will take before I am handed the book, however.”

She was asking Lawrence, making it clear that she was determined to complete this mission as best she could. That would be the last hurdle.

"I've already given my people in Lenos their marching orders for this eventuality."

"You thought ahead, did you?"

With that there was nothing more to discuss, but Lawrence still felt compelled to add one last thing.

"No one could walk straight with three hundred coins hanging on their ass."

Holo laughed, obviously picturing Lou with a scorched ass. Even Hildir found the joke funny enough to smile, which was precisely what Lawrence was hoping to see to ease the mood. He coughed and continued.

"Then this will take five or six days total."

In a deteriorating situation like this, that might as well be an eternity. But the God above had made these lands wide, like the cruel being He was.

"I cannot make it a promise."

"They should be in Kinisen about now.. we can only hope they'll still have the book."

When he acted as a merchant, Lawrence would never intentionally comfort anyone. Not even Holo. They nodded in unison. A good handshake meant more than comfort when one bargained, and it was more easily forgotten if things went sour. Hildir spoke with such vigor that it was scarcely believable that the voice was coming from a small rabbit.

"Please go as soon as possible."

Holo stretched.

"Kid, you are really daring."

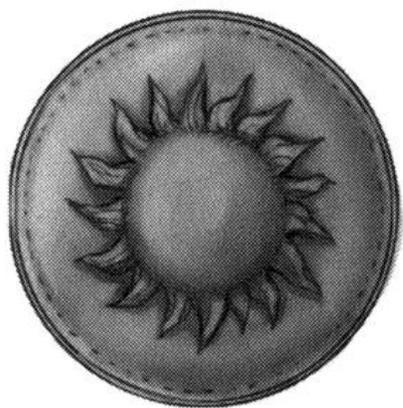
She aimed that last statement at Lawrence. She was hardly going to act like a cargo-hauling mule, but she still grabbed the sack of coins, some water and food, and walked away. The sky was so clear that Lawrence could see the bird high over their heads. It circled a few times before flying toward the east.

Hildir was already gone. His company was in turmoil, so if he didn't show up before long they might even kill him. These were probably the longest days of his life. It made Lawrence feel a bit proud that a simple traveling merchant like him could help someone like Hildir. Of course, Hildir

never did outright ask them for help, precisely because Lawrence *was* just a traveling merchant.

And here he was, getting involved in the conflict of a beast like Diva company. Him, just a mere peddler. A lonely, lonely peddler who walked back to his room at the inn and saw just how big it was. He lay there on his back, until he realized that only an hour had passed and he was already starting to miss Holo.

第 六 幕



## Chapter 7

When he woke up on the second day after that, Lawrence looked around for Holo instinctively. The moment he realized what he was doing his face turned red. He was doing exactly the same thing that endeared Holo to him. With the dead quietness of the room, all he could hear was the noise out on the street. He scratched his head and sighed, then wandered down to the patio and greeted the mercenaries.

He washed his face and shaved while they chatted and exercised. It was a ritual he was used to for many years, but this was the first time he felt hollow while doing it. The reason was obvious: Holo. It had only been a couple of days but his morning ritual felt mechanical, like something was missing. He should have insisted on going to Yoitsu with Holo, rather than getting tied up in Lesco. His only saving grace was he was alone, so thinking about such embarrassing things wouldn't earn him a reprimand.

He emerged onto the street and did everything he could to exchange his silver coins for gold ones. It should have been at the usual rates set by Diva's management, but everyone was speculating on the new currency now. Silver coins were beloved, and moneychangers were hoarding gold coins at unbelievable rates.

Normally, this is when a guild would form in a town. Everyone knew what would happen if the priests stopped praying, the farmers stopped farming, and the soldiers stopped gambling just to start gambling like this. But this wasn't a normal town, it was a free place full of hope.

No one would stop the speculation. Indeed, Diva's backers might even be spurring it on. If silver appreciated, they would earn more, and silver coins were just silver with certain images punched onto them that magically made them even more valuable. Even lead could be worth as much as gold was when minted as a coin.

In the end Lawrence managed to get the gold coins he wanted from the money changers. Unlike silver, gold did not rust or dull; it always shone. Not a soul in Lawrence's home town had ever seen a gold coin, and he was no different until he met and traveled with his master.

Each time he saw a real gold coin he remembered why they were held in such lofty regard. They were heavy and shiny, like a concentrated form of prestige and worldly importance. Not even stamping an image onto gold coins mattered, they would always be just as respected even after their original creator died.

Silver coins didn't have that luxury. They weren't carefully treasured, they were simply objects used for routine trading. The person stamped onto them mattered. That's why Lawrence was surprised when he approached some mercenaries, who usually talked about nothing but the state of the land, and overheard them discussing the image that would be stamped onto the

new currency.

“Will it just be some baron?”

The man talking had a striking scar around his eye.

“Ya think so? Which one? Maybe all of ‘em?”

“Well.. I’m guessing maybe the head of Diva company?”

At a glance they seemed crass, but these men were more knowledgeable than Lawrence had expected. That made sense in hindsight; they had visited many towns and seen many people. Of course they would have learned a bit about everything. A person with excellent eyes could instantly see anything, but even a normal person could make the effort to see just as much. So said Lawrence’s master.

“Like the barons would let that happen. Besides, it’d be no fun for the person on the coin to always be hearing ‘who the heck’s this guy?’”

“Then.. who else would it be?”

“Who knows?”

The men shrugged and put on a sly look.

“What say you, Mr. merchant?”

They brought Lawrence into their little game. They would know him by now, given how close he’d been to Myuri and Moid lately. Regardless, they still made Lawrence nervous. He replied like he was talking to wild animals.

“They’re all about mining, so maybe something like digging equipment?”

“Oh yeah! That might be it.”

Mining companies didn’t bother with flags; they simply hung ironworks over their doors. They knew what was most important to those who visited them, and liked to make it clear what they were all about. A person’s image was usually only put on a coin when they were the chief baron supporting the minting. In a case like this, however, it might not even be a person’s image that wound up on the coins.

“Seems a real pity to just plop something like a shovel on the coins.”

“Why’s that?”

“They’d lose their chance to get famous!”

“You ass, the age where people want to be famous in such a cheap way’s over. There’s no point to that anymore!”

“Ah, you might be right.”

The men smiled rudely at one another like it meant nothing.

“Then again, it’s not like they’d just agree on mining tools, either.”

Lawrence had no idea what to say, but the men had moved on and lifted up the cards that had just been dealt. One of them immediately tossed his hand onto the table, and another tossed his on top of them. The rest all shouted “damn” in unison and tossed their own cards aside.

“Damn it!”

They griped as they flung their crude copper coins on the table. The man who’d won the hand then snatched them and spoke in a more relaxed tone.

“Who’re ‘they?’”

“Well ya know, mining villages like where I’m from. They turn into nothin’ but holes full of mud. They’d probably riot if someone had the nerve to put mining equipment on the coins.”

The men who had lost the hand were all holding their cups out for more wine, but their hands dangled in the air when they heard that.

“They’ll probably think that way too, and go for somethin’ that won’t cause no fights.”

“Like what?”

“Who knows? If I had to guess..”

The man talking was supposed to be shuffling the cards, but instead he played with a coin on the table and continued.

“..I’d say it’d be better to use a familiar baron. I like the ones with Duke Rikihodan of Coluba.. I wish people still used them coins.”

That was a heroic name from many a famous story. He’d lost his status over time, and was eventually killed by the son he’d fathered with his mistress. Inevitably, all of his coins were collected and remade into new ones, and stiff penalties awaited those who still used the old ones. It was a typical way to keep people from using the coins of an enemy.

“Right, like they’d pick an image that would cause so many problems.”

An older mercenary spoke up and put things into perspective. Coins were coins, not tools to promote fame. It might even hinder the uptake of a new currency, since people trusted not the person on the coin, but the power they wielded. It took a lot of power to issue currency, so it made sense to use some symbol of authority.

“And yet we’re the ones who’d prefer if there *were* problems, huh?”

Yet another mercenary chimed in.

“True, true.”

Another round of coarse laughter rang out from the table before the men began discussing their favorite barons. Lawrence only knew some of those names, but he didn’t mind being in such a lively atmosphere. It was a happy conversation, nothing like the talks merchants usually shared. Who was good for what, who was more loved - these were simply not the topics merchants discussed. It was always who could earn them what, and who were the stingy ones to avoid. Money was the ultimate topic.

Lawrence would have preferred these kinds of chats sometimes, since they really made things feel simpler. The world would be a better place if everyone could laugh things off like this. His mind began wandering as the topic shifted to personal relationships, and he wondered how people managed to get by with so many currencies in the north. It was just so inconvenient.. who would argue against convenience?

No, Diva were doing the right thing in that regard, he felt. The powers that be had been trying to keep people under control for their own profit since time immemorial. All Lawrence could do was hope that Hildir managed to hold out until Holo returned. He left the table of mercenaries and began walking down the street again while losing himself in his thoughts. If everything could be reduced to terms of money, without things like fame or authority getting in the way, the world would be a better place.

Even Diva was letting things get in their way because of some fussy barons. Why was everyone so stupid? Of course it would be better to not put a baron’s face on the money. The mercenaries might not agree, but what say did they have anyway? The image needed to be something beyond dispute, easily understood, and acceptable to everyone. It was a riddle that Lawrence had no answer for.

Earlier, when he had eaten with Myuri and Moid, their conversation had been far more serious. They had spoken of things like Diva’s internal problems and their own plans to move on to Yoitsu. Yet even in that atmosphere Lawrence had been considering this problem. It was partly out of sheer curiosity, but the real reason was that he was trying to avoid feeling lonely.

Still, when he returned to his room he was alone. There was nothing better for him to do than go to bed. He couldn't help Hildir, and he had no work to attend to. He was practically useless, and if he dwelled on that it wouldn't make him feel any better. He was lonely. He was a merchant, who could only exist in a world with buyers and sellers. Why talk when there wasn't anyone who would reply? It only made one feel even more isolated and small.

Even Holo had grown tired of that feeling and left the wheat fields she had tended to for centuries. It would have driven him mad to be put in her place in such a quiet and lonely field. She sure was amazing. If all went well, at least he would only have to wait one or two more nights for her.. maybe three. And even if things didn't go smoothly, Hildir's avian friend should report that to them soon. Of course, Lawrence was hoping for things to go smoothly this time. Surely they were due for one event where things went smoothly.

He wasn't fussing anymore, and just wanted to solve the problem in front of them so he could move on without regrets. He'd manage to start taking care of his own future, in his own shop with Holo and other assistants to help him. Even the successor he was grooming to replace him. Wait, why did they have ears and a tail like a wolf? That wasn't good, the Lenos guards were already knocking to come cut them off. With scissors, no less.

Oh great, now he had to get Norah to sew them back on. Holo was going to be so angry about this! Maybe it would be better to get Eve to help him out? No, that was even worse. Aw, jeez.. Holo was already pounding her fists on the table. He had no choice but to do it himself. How could he possibly thread such a delicate needle himself? The thread kept slipping past the eye. Wait a minute.. was he dreaming? He opened his eyes, and realized that it was pitch black around him. That knocking.. that wasn't Holo at all. Someone was at the door!

"Coming!"

The knocking stopped the moment he shouted out. Who was it? The door opened before he could decide.

"Mr. Lawrence."

A certain voice of experience flooded the room along with candlelight. Moid had come, along with one of his young attendants. With the candle's flames dancing under Moid's face, Lawrence could see just how grim his expression was.

"My apologies.. I fell asleep.. what's going on?"

Lawrence followed them downstairs, marvelling at the fact that he'd fallen asleep without even taking off his coat. He was fumbling with his buttons and trying to tidy his sleeves, but Moid's voice snapped him back to reality before he could finish that ritual.

"There are soldiers everywhere."

“What?”

Moid’s eyes didn’t flinch at all. He kept talking like this was an everyday thing to him, as common as tying his shoelaces.

“Diva decided to fight. They’ve already given the order.”

Lawrence felt his body winking into the darkness around them. He knew exactly what that meant. Hildir had lost before they even got the book to him.

“It seems we’re leaving town even sooner than we planned: tonight.”

The dead quietness of the inn was eerie; the only sounds he heard were people shuffling around downstairs preparing to leave.

“What about you, Mr. Lawrence?”

Lawrence hesitated at the question. If the mercenaries left town, they were obviously not with Diva. Not only would they be treated as enemies, but having been taken care of for so long would practically ensure they would be viewed as spies. Lawrence would be doomed; he had no training to deal with this. He couldn’t slip through under some assumed name like a real spy. Worse, no one in town would dare question Diva’s word, and Lawrence had a deal with Hildir.

It was likely the banned book was utterly useless now, and that staying here was even worse than trying to escape. If the book was Hildir’s last hope, and he was working so hard for something that might prove useless, then Hildir was trapped. Lawrence too, since he was in on everything. He had agreed to help Hildir for what was essentially his own gain, and as such he was jointly responsible.

“I have to talk to someone first.”

“Talk?”

Moid was taken aback at first, but quickly realized Lawrence meant Hildir. Unfortunately, finding Hildir wouldn’t be easy right now, so Moid was stumped.

“The whole town’s a mess because of this, since they made the order at night. Clearly someone in that company knows a thing or two about wars, since anyone wanting to leave town at night can’t do that anymore, so we’ll have to help them in the morning. It’s a brilliant move.”

For someone like him to call their move brilliant made it clear how much trouble their rivals were in right now. Painfully clear. Lawrence was already worried about whether Hildir was even alive or not.

“I have no choice but to see him.”

Moid simply kept staring at Lawrence, until he finally managed to nod. He could understand that this wasn't a simple situation. Lawrence wasn't a mercenary after all, he shouldn't be doing anything like this.

“Would you like me to send someone with you?”

Moid couldn't resist making a kind offer, but Lawrence shook his head.

“We're leaving right away. We'll head southeast, through the cattle lots. I'd imagine some of our old friends are doing the same, so we'll linger awhile in those fields. Please.. if you can make it..”

He spoke like he was actually talking to a friend, with a tone like he might actually miss Lawrence. It compelled Lawrence to nod resolutely and ask the question he needed to ask.

“How dangerous is it out there right now?”

“Not as bad as it normally is before a war; no robbing or killing just yet. But then, Diva's sure to be keeping an eye on things, so I strongly recommend that you don't go.”

There wasn't any wall around the town, so leaving wasn't all that difficult. That's why Moid was so calm right now - he was probably quite familiar with running from cities, even when they had walls. Even the young man next to him just calmly looked outside and mentioned there was a fire burning.

“Thank you for watching over me.”

That was the customary line a traveling merchant like Lawrence should say.

“I look forward to doing so again.”

Moid gave a sincere response.

“Then I'll have to make you work hard yet again.”

With that they wished Lawrence the best of luck and quietly parted ways. He looked down on the street from his window and noticed just how strange things were outside. Just like the past few days, people were drinking and dancing, but it felt somehow deflated right now. It wasn't like someone had thrown rotten fruit on everyone, but it still felt hostile.

Clearly, Diva's power had just been handed away. New kingdoms supplanted the old ones, and once the old one collapsed the people from it could be killed at any second. It would be surprising to hear that a new king just let the old government leave peaceably, because it was a

situation that usually called for blood. However, it wasn't quite so simple when it came to companies.

Companies knew everything about their business, and kept friends everywhere. They weren't built in a day, and someone like the owner of Diva company was a revered figure. Even Hildir would be viewed as an elite, and he wouldn't just wind up dead. Not without being tricked into making a move that left his belly open for a slicing. Lawrence had seen his fair share of such public executions.

He didn't feel any eyes upon him as he looked outside, but then he wasn't Holo. He didn't really have a sixth sense for that kind of thing. In fact, he didn't really have anywhere to go, period. All he could do was stay in his room now. If he had to talk to Hildir, he should wait for him rather than making a foolish move.

Things seemed quite dire, so he couldn't stay for too long. Even if Holo wasn't at his side, he just had to leave messages for her everywhere and she would find him before too long. Before that, he had to meet Hildir. Not to talk about some kind of counter attack - he wasn't strong or wise enough for something like that. But he had to convince Hildir to flee, rather than being brash.

Hildir might be loyal to Diva, but in a sense he was a kin to Holo. On an emotional level, Lawrence shared his desire to bring peace and stability to this land, so he wanted to help him in any way he could. Hildir could fight for his dream, but if no one joined him then they couldn't bear any fruit. Lawrence wanted him to see that day.

He had no desire for Holo to see yet another point of light from her past vanish. In fact that was even more important to him. Just as he realized that, he heard shuffling noises downstairs. The Myuri mercenaries had booked the entire inn. The owners and workers would all have gone home for the night, along with the mercenaries themselves. No one should be here.

Of course that could only mean one thing: someone had broken in. Lawrence straightened his sleeves and coughed. He felt for the dagger on his belt and slowly crept out of his room. It felt cold in the barren inn, which really hit home for him. He could finally appreciate just how much people warmed up a building.

His eyes were too accustomed to the dark to risk using a candle, so he went downstairs keeping his footsteps in sync with his heartbeats. As he came up to the bar on the first floor he saw a sliver of light peeking out from down the corridor leading to the back door. Given that the mercenaries wouldn't have been so careless as to leave it unlocked, he stood there until he noticed a white body moving around.

“Mr. Hildir?”

There was a doorless shed just outside, next to the back door. As Lawrence softly called out, a

rabbit appeared.. but not a white one. Not with that gash in his right shoulder, or the front paw that looked like it had been soaked in red dye. It was obvious what that meant.

“Mr. Hildir.. are you alright?”

“Well.. I’m not dead yet.”

Lawrence did his best to smile at the rabbit.

“What’s the situation?”

Hildir’s ears shifted at the question and he spoke with a tone not befitting a wounded man.

“There’s no time to fill you in on everything, so we’ll have to stick to the main points.”

That meant he was being pursued.

“The radicals seized power, and forced us to sign over control to them. My master and I are powerless now. Our only saving grace is that they know it’ll be too hard to run the company without us, so they aren’t likely to kill us.”

Lawrence had anticipated that, and also his next words.

“So I’m not giving up.”

With that he turned his body around and walked on his wounded paw back to the shed. Upon returning he had a letter in his mouth.

“Ms. Holo may still retrieve the book, so I can’t give up.”

“..What’s your plan?”

Lawrence kept it simple. Diva was immensely wealthy, to the point where their resources would never be exhausted. Bargaining with them was impossible, even with Holo’s help. Especially when nearly every noble in the area supported them. It wasn’t a fight that they could win.

“Leave this place and go northeast to a town called Sovereign.”

Lawrence got the impression that Myuri had mentioned that name before.

“It’s one of several towns moving against Diva company. They deal in fur and amber, and will also want to stop this. It’s a strategically important town, so it’s likely that all our enemies will be gathering there.”

He nudged the letter to Lawrence with his nose.

“Please send this to them. It is a request for their help in stopping these radicals.”

He was surely thinking of that old line: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

“Should anything unexpected happen, my bird friend will meet us in Sovereign. That was our plan, so he’ll also lead Ms. Holo there. Oh, yes, and that other letter..”

Hildir looked up at Lawrence to explain the second letter Lawrence was studying.

“There’s a baron to the north of Sovereign who isn’t fond of Diva company. He’s pretty much the only one against us around here, on account of not wanting to help anyone who will ruin the land. If you tell him that the radicals in our company will do just that, he may finally take a stand and fight.”

Indeed, a person who was able to stand up to such a company would be a powerful ally. This was clearly a good strategy to take. And yet, Hildir still struggled to smile to show how clearly he didn’t want to give up. Even if it was a waste of energy.

“Please Mr. Lawrence.. Take this letter to Sovereign and fight against these radicals with Ms. Holo.”

His right paw was injured, so he was leaning forward awkwardly. His appearance was suddenly so frightful that Lawrence couldn’t help but step back, like he was looking at a dead spirit that was caught between worlds. It was obvious what really had to be done. Merchants were all aware of the wisdom of biding their time until the tables could be turned.

And yet, Lawrence couldn’t bring himself to say it. Not to someone who was so resolved. Trying to convince someone so resolved to die with that wisdom was the height of naivete. Hildir was standing as firmly as he could, staring death right in the eyes. There was simply no way Lawrence could accept these letters. This wasn’t some children’s fable, he simply wasn’t the right man for such a responsibility.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

Hildir finally called out to the frozen man before him. Lawrence finally gasped and looked back, only to see a poker face staring back up at him.

“You’re about to give up, aren’t you?”

There was no way that Lawrence could have kept his doubts from being written plainly on his face. And yet, Hildir kept pressing him.

“We have had many such problems in the past, but survived all of them. This one, too, can be survived.. it’s just..”

Hildir glanced over at the blood clotting on his shoulder. It looked like his white fur had broken out in a rash.

“..a bit worse.”

It wasn't as if Lawrence and Holo had an easy trip so far. Others who knew their story would also know they had faced many difficulties where they could have given up, but hadn't. They could have died long ago, or ended up as galley slaves, had they been just a little less fortunate.

Wasn't it horribly unfair of Hildir to hoist this on someone like Lawrence and expect them to be confident? Hildir was the main character in this story, and had won his contests and had his successes. Someone like him could afford to think they couldn't lose. It surely came naturally to them. But not someone like Lawrence, who knew how bad the situation really was.

Lawrence had no choice but to be objective. Hildir couldn't even stand anymore. He was the only one who could delude himself into thinking that the goddess of luck still stood beside him. Despite that, Hildir still stared at Lawrence, who was at a loss for what to say and could only avert his eyes.

“I've made my choice to stand with Diva company. I won't betray them, no matter what happens. That may make me an idiot, but I can live with that.”

It pierced Lawrence's heart to hear that, but even though he raised his hand to stop Hildir, he fearlessly continued.

“I thought I knew how painful it was to live such a long life. It felt just like wasting time, and if I chose to not trust anyone, I only ended up living in my own little world all alone. Surely you understand, Mr. Lawrence, because that's why Ms. Holo has been with you as a human..”

“Please.. stop.”

Lawrence repeated himself to stop Hildir.

“You're the type that can never be satisfied. Just like Holo and I.. just as trapped.”

Lawrence knew it was true, but at least Holo knew when to give up. He had wanted to praise her dearly for that. Being able to let go was crucial, and not just when one lost. You had to leave something behind to move forward. Did Hildir not understand that? He just stared at Lawrence.

“I'm counting on you to deliver those letters.”

He began walking away, and Lawrence froze. He somehow managed to reply.

“I refuse.”

Only then did Hildir pause. Still, he only did so briefly before continuing. His body was terribly weak now, and he had no companions to turn to. No one else to deliver these letters to Sovereign. His body vanished through the crack in the door, which then closed. All that remained was dead silence and two letters.

What could Lawrence do? The situation wouldn't change if he delivered these letters. Diva might even kill him now. Delivering them just wasn't possible right now. He shook his head in a bid to calm himself, but all he could think about was what was in it for him if he delivered these letters versus what he stood to lose.

That was really the only way he could calm himself. He had to. If Sovereign was the only place that could stand up to Diva, then others were probably just too scared to stand up to them. That would be what Diva feared the most. If Hildir was right and Sovereign could delay them even for a moment, it was another moment for them to make a move. If that proved enough to balance the scales of war, then Sovereign might become their ally.

All of these assumptions stuck out as wide-eyed dreams. Hildir's dream, and that of the Diva company, was effectively over. Their hard-won utopia had just been trampled under the feet of the soldiers outside. Lawrence felt nothing but pain from that realization. He knew it was a dream that couldn't exist in the real world, but for someone who dreamed of that to lose so horribly was too much for him, especially after having been so close to achieving his own dream of opening a shop.

Only fools kept struggling in vain when the situation became hopeless. Nothing was worth more than one's life. That was why Lawrence stood there with his fists balled up, and left the letters behind. Even if their bargain for the book had failed, he could still join Myuri and his band and live to see another day. It was the only real choice he had.

He could live with the blisters on his body, but not leaping directly into the fire. Sure, the banned book might salvage the situation, but the risk being foisted on him and his companions was so vast that taking the letters was an utterly irrational thing for him to do. Even Holo would agree. He could only abandon the impossibilities and live on to fight another day. That was his only choice.

And yet, every single step he took from the letters weighed on him until he could no longer walk away. It was obvious why, since to him doing nothing was the same as wasting time. To him, trusting no one meant living alone. To him, his dream of owning a shop was because he wanted a place to belong. He wanted it so badly there was no way he could walk away as long as there was something he could do.. no matter how insignificant it was.

If he could build something that would outlast him, and have someone succeed him to take care of it, then his life would have been worthwhile. That all required so much luck that Lawrence knew the value of having friends he could trust. For Hildir to turn to him specifically

after losing all of his friends.. for a rabbit with nowhere to go to appeal to Lawrence’s emotions like this.. it was just too damn cunning. How dare he tell Lawrence that *he* was the lucky one?

“You bastard!!”

Lawrence yelled out at the invisible hands of Hildir clawing him back to the letters. He knew that if he didn’t have this damn heart beating inside him for others that he would have been a successful merchant long ago. He forced himself up to his room, and made sure his things were packed. He had to keep his mind off of things. He had to give up this time. He had to keep warning himself not to do it.

“I can’t go on following every single soul that wants to jump into hell.”

Hildir’s dream had cost him his life. It was the same fate that Lawrence and Holo had only managed to escape by a hair’s breadth. They had always managed to come out on top. He couldn’t just listen to the cries of the supporting actors on this stage. He was a merchant. He knew what lay ahead of him the moment he stopping thinking about things in terms of profit and loss. That’s what he kept warning himself about over and over right now, until his bags were packed and he was set to leave. But the moment his hand touched the doorknob..

“Oh, what’s this?”

That voice sounded really drunk. That alone was nothing strange so far for this town, but what followed..

“Hey.. this is great!”

“What a find! Looks like God’s giving us a break!”

“This is quite the rabbit..”

Lawrence’s hair stood on-end.

“Ah, it’s pretty cut up.. wonder if it escaped from a kitchen?”

“Nah, no one’s here. Let’s just take it.”

“Yeah, I guess- hey, it’s still alive!”

Lawrence couldn’t keep himself from dropping his bags and rushing out. He flew down the corridor and past the bar and stairwell. He flung open the door that Hildir had closed and looked around madly. There he spotted two drunks, staring down at the ground and nudging Hildir with their feet.

“Hey now, don’t try to run!”

“Damn.. Looks like his head’s been bashed..”

“Oh? Well.. let’s finish the job.”

Just as one of the drunks lifted his foot, Lawrence shouted.

“Wait!”

His voice rang out even more loudly in the midnight air, and they quickly spotted him.

“Hang on!”

“Huh?”

“That rabbit..”

He pointed and Hildir and ran up to them, staring at their feet. They alternated their glances at the dying rabbit and Lawrence.

“What, you wanna take it from us?”

Their voices made it clear that they were drunk enough to spoil for a fight. Lawrence was out of time, though; guards had heard the commotion and were on their way. If they were the ones looking for Hildir, it was all over.

“No, no.. this little guy’s my supper, but he managed to flee the kitchen. I’ve been looking for him, so thanks for finding him.”

It wasn’t his dagger that he pulled out, but two silver coins. The drunken men each took a Trenni silver coin - each worth a basket of rabbits - and stared at them wordlessly before quickly walking away. They knew how much they had been paid.

“Ah, sorry then, I didn’t know it was yours.”

“Yeah, we’re sure glad we found its owner!”

They clearly knew that the man paying them off wasn’t to be trifled with if he gave them two Trenni to give him a rabbit. They couldn’t afford the problems that might come up later, so they quickly fled the scene. Lawrence watched them leave before he turned to Hildir. The rabbit just lay there, covered in wounds, clearly at death’s door. Perhaps he was already beyond help.

Had his friends fled out of fear, or had he been betrayed? Lawrence had no idea, but clearly he really had no friends left, if he was dying on the ground and being kicked by two random drunks. He had helped scheme up a new vision for the future, one without the greedy and

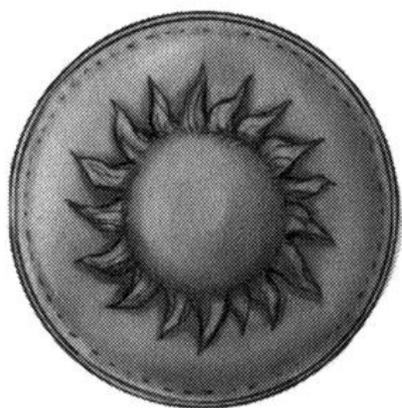
conniving, and was still fighting for it now. He had jumped into that dream, and it hadn't come true. It was a complete failure.

The reason there were people who succeeded was because there were many people who came before them that paved the way to their success. Perhaps it was Hildir's fate to just be another one of those bodies, but he had fought so hard to that end. He had, together with the Diva company, given merchants like Lawrence a glimpse of that possible future, albeit for a brief instant.

Such an exciting glimpse was hardly enough, and yet that was all the greed of the barons had permitted them. Many people took it upon themselves to challenge the power structure, and they all inevitably lost. Lawrence had no way to help him now, since only the living could dream. And yet, he had to find a way.

The truth was that a life of nothing but big accomplishments wasn't really a life worth living. Lawrence lifted Hildir up and returned to the corridor, took the letters, and packed them away. He then walked on and on until he finally met Myuri, all the while carrying Hildir's small, corpse-like body.

第 六 幕



## Chapter 8

“Not even the wiliest merchant could do anything in this situation.”

Myuri lifted Hildir up, now that his wounds were treated. He hadn't mentioned Hildir to his men, so they all marvelled at being ordered to treat a rabbit. But ointment and bandages couldn't rouse him from his near-death sleep. Mercenaries were always harsh with their humor, and the men now joked that they had only been preparing their dinner.

They were in a meadow not far from Lesco, with no cloud cover to rob them of the starlight. It was freezing, however; some of the men had wrapped themselves in blankets, and others had started a fire in a clearing of the meadow. They eyed Lawrence from afar, but none had yet asked why such an ill-suited person had brought his wagon where it didn't belong.. though they would be expecting an answer sooner rather than later.

“It's a long way to go, but wisdom dictates that we head south.”

Lawrence pointed at the map that Moid had spread out in front of them.

“Lenos? But Diva won't hesitate to draw first blood, and no matter how strong we are we're just sitting ducks in fields like these.”

“True, but going north would brand us as traitors, and so going south will give them less of an incentive to focus a large-scale attack on us.”

Diva company would indeed need a good reason to send a larger force out to pursue them.

“Quite.. and Ms. Holo will find it easier to rendezvous with us this way.”

“Precisely. There are no significant villages or towns on the way, so we can just calmly head along the stream to Tolchin. If we make it that far, we should be alright; not even Diva has the numbers to pit themselves against Lenos.”

Ploania was also just south of Lenos, so fighting there would incite the King and the Ploanian nobility. Diva could hardly take such a risk.

“What say you, Mr. Lawrence?”

Not even in his wildest dreams had Lawrence envisioned himself talking strategies with the heads of such a storied band of mercenaries. All of his dream-dealings with mercenaries ended up with him being robbed and coolly asked how he wanted to die.

“No complaints.”

“Alright then.. that’s that.”

Myuri stood and hopped off of Lawrence’s wagon, then strode toward his men briskly. They all banded around him like children around a jester performing in a market square. But when Myuri flipped his coat and gestured to them, he didn’t follow it up with a wordy performance. He cut to the chase, and gave them no room for interpretation.

They would carry on all night, stopping only long enough to fill their bellies. His men were ordered to prepare their meal, and Lawrence saw a sight he didn’t expect: grown men celebrating like children being ordered to do something brave and important. Moid skillfully rolled up his map before asking Lawrence a question.

“And what about you, Mr. Lawrence?”

“Hmm?”

At first Lawrence suspected he was being asked to join them for supper, but Moid continued on while nuzzling the chin of the horse drawing the wagon.

“I’ll have one of the men lead your horse, if you’d like. It’ll be tough to see your way around this terrain even in this light.”

The overt implication was that Lawrence was just a merchant, and so he should save his stamina by riding on the wagon. And yet there was no way he could bring himself to do that in front of the mercenaries. It wasn’t out of fear, but simple respect.

“No, I’m walking too, so I’ll lead him. I mean..”

Lawrence paused briefly.

“..I can’t just sit on my ass while Holo’s out there running her heart out.”

Moid immediately smacked himself in the face.

“Ah, jeez.. Sorry, that was a dumb thing to say.”

Moid really was an honorable guy. Lawrence’s opinion of mercenaries would change if more of them were like him.

“You’re sure you’ll be alright?”

Moid ran his hand through the horse’s mane before tying his map and handing to another man outside the wagon. Lawrence was surprised by how crowded it was inside the wagon with Moid there; it was always comfortable when it was just him and Holo.

“Looks like all that effort’s gone to waste. I mean about the banned book.”

“..Yeah.”

Lawrence glanced over at Hildir, who was still asleep in his cage.

“He should have realized it was time for a strategic retreat, but when you run such a big company you tend to forget that you’re just one person.. if the others mutiny, you’re basically doomed.”

“True, true, better to live and fight another day.”

“Though maybe that’s just me being naive.”

Supper was already being served, and everyone was drinking merrily. Moid asked for a bottle of wine and opened it in the wagon.

“Nah, I think you’ve got the right idea, though life would be boring if everyone thought that way.”

Those who lived on the battlefield were proud, and the thoughts of someone like Lawrence were just the thoughts of a small-minded and naive merchant. It was interesting to hear Moid agree with him, though that might just be because it wasn’t really something one could call intrinsically wrong. Myuri, on the other hand, returned with another opinion.

“That’s not what you said to me, Moid.”

“Sir..”

“Don’t you call me ‘sir.’ You’re the one always asking me to face reality and now look at you, all drunk on the prospect of war.”

Moid frowned at Myrui’s chiding and scratched his head. Myrui happily hopped back into the wagon.

“Still, I agree with Mr. Lawrence. I don’t like Diva company, neither the conservatives nor radicals.”

Had Hildir and Diva heralded a new era, Myuri and his men would be bygones of an older time. In a sense, Myuri probably saw them as a nemesis.

“I mean what’s the point? Why help a company dreaming to become a fake dragon? I mean, there *is* profit in it, but..”

Myuri stopped to sip some wine, and just then their suppers arrived. It was a simple meal, bread and sausages, but on such a cold night it was as good as gold.

“Well, in the end you’ll have nothing but money, and that’ll be gone soon enough after you buy some wine and happiness.”

Myuri wolfed down his bread in a few short bites, almost like he was proving his point. Those who worked only for food would only be left hungry after they ate it.

“What say you, Mr. Lawrence? You’re the merchant here.. care to share?”

Lawrence was gnawing on a sausage, but had to turn away. It wasn’t just the grease scalding him, though, Myuri’s question was just as hot.

“I met someone in Lenos whose thirst for money amazed even me.”

“Oh?”

Both Myuri and Moid were eyeing him with interest now.

“That person cares nothing about other’s lives, only money. Even their own life means nothing in the face of money, and when I confronted them over it we ended up drawing knives in a storeroom..”

His audience’s eyes opened wide, and grinned like little boys.

“What’s the point of having so much money? It’s like drinking brine to quench your thirst. That’s how I see it.”

He didn’t want to remember the look on Eve’s face at that time, but he could never forget her tone. Clear, powerful, but also embarrassed. When he’d asked her what she thought lay at the end of that path, this was her reply: “I expect someone will be standing there to tell me something.”

“All about expectation..”

Moid lowered his head as Myuri repeated himself.

“Expectation..”

After repeating himself one last time, Myuri looked away like he was staring at a bird high overhead carrying the answer to this riddle in its beak. When he finally turned back to Lawrence, he was smiling.

“Hey Moid, you think that person would join us if we invited him?”

“Nah. Sounds like a hell of a fighter, but not someone I’d want to pin my hopes on. Someone like that’ll cooperate for profits just as easily as they’ll betray you. There’s no shortage of people who live by that expectation.”

Hearing that, Lawrence wouldn’t be surprised if Moid knew Eve already. Myuri raised an eyebrow and turned his eyes back on Lawrence. All Lawrence could do was nod and sigh.

“Then you were betrayed too, Mr. Lawrence?”

“Not only was Holo mortgaged, but my own life became a bet.”

Myuri whistled, but Moid just quietly ate the rest of his bread.

“Damn, merchants are horrible. They might not look the part, but they’re even worse than we are.”

His eyes had since turned to Hildir.

“Swords can only get so long, but merchants can keep making as much money as they want. They might’ve failed this time, but I wonder how long before the whole world’s being run by them?”

Myuri spoke while running his finger along the length of his sword, like a bloodthirsty king wanting to kill his opponent before they could grow up and overtake him.

“Well, maybe one day. But it’s still too soon for that, so I guess we’ll have to keep fighting.”

It was obvious he tired of the conversation now, but he still narrowed his eyes like a child who had already been warned to not kill innocent creatures.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about the riots in the north, though.”

He finally lowered his sword before continuing.

“Please lend me your thoughts. I can’t think of anyone who could stand up to Diva now. I’ve also heard about the rebellious people in Sovereign, but they hardly seem capable.”

That was exactly where Lawrence had been asked to deliver his letters, and now the mercenary before him was denouncing them. It really didn’t make any sense to deliver a letter when all it would do was place him in danger. He wished that line of rationalization could comfort him, because he could really use the pick-me-up.

“And what of Ms. Holo? Will she try to stop this war?”

Holo had already made her choice, and wouldn't do anything more than follow the lead of a certain sheepish art dealer named Hugh. She would clear her mind of all of it. Seeing Lawrence shake his head made Myuri stare at the ground and nod sadly.

"It was a painful choice for her to make, but she did. She really is remarkable."

"We'd best not tarnish our own good flag either."

"Agreed. All we can do now is change our approach and keep a vigilant eye."

His intentional evasion of the word "retreat" seemed to satisfy Myuri.

"You know, it's been a long time since we've moved at night. It's quite nice, especially with a clear sky like this."

Myuri stared at the sky and shielded his eyes. There was no sun, of course, but without clouds, the stars shone brightly enough for the gesture to seem less silly.

"Yeah, I mean snow's still bearable, but what if it rained.."

Snow could be dealt with, and thicker clouds meant it would be warmer out.

"I don't care either way. I just meant that a clear sky lets us watch the sun rise."

"The sunrise?"

"Definitely. Seeing that after trudging the whole night really helps you look forward to the future again, especially in desperate circumstances like these. We always manage to do our best thinking then, so it's my favorite sight in the morning."

He proclaimed that with pride and Moid laughed bitterly.

"The scent of blood, sweat and death are all around you. You swat at the flies, but they're always there, just like the blood on your hands. But then, for one perfect moment, the sun breaks over the horizon and purifies everything.."

Myuri shut his eyes.

"It reminds me why I'll never quit this job."

One would feel that way if all they ever knew was war. Things like guilt could be washed away, they really could, at least for a soldier like Myuri. But Lawrence was a merchant - he hoped to fight so that actual fighting didn't have to happen.

"Shame that we probably won't get to witness that splendor this morning."

They had left after Diva started the fight, and yet they weren't being pursued yet. Myuri had stated the reasons why they wouldn't, including Lenos and Holo, but there was also Hildir. After Hildir arrived in Lenos and calmed himself, he might be able to put things into perspective. Until then, all they could do was plan their next move.

Taking Holo to Yoitsu would be nice, but if she let him then Lawrence would rather make sure his business was secure. His life had taken so many turns lately, and before spring arrived he wanted to make all the stops he had to make on his trade route. Not to mention all of the other baggage he had to deal with to begin a new life with Holo.

“Alright.. our bellies are full, so let's get going.”

With Myuri's command, Moid slowly stood up.

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It felt more surreal to Lawrence to be traveling with mercenaries at night than if he'd been walking with a ghost. It made him want to laugh at how bizarre the situation was, especially with one of the most important employees of the largest mining firm in history on his wagon. And that wasn't even considering that said employee was a rabbit who was hurt when he tried to bring peace to the north.

It all seemed so coincidental that he might as well have been dreaming. And yet, such coincidences did happen in a world where the connections between people meant more than the efforts of any one person. As Myuri put it, “not even the wiliest merchant could do anything in this situation.” Not even the most accomplished individual with the luck of the gods could turn rocks into gold.

Because of that understanding, Holo had opted to not try solving everything with her fangs. Her power had its limits. Even Hildir could be taken down with mere swords, losing his status as a top executive in a company and nearly meeting a pathetic end at the hands of drunken fools. Even he looked as frail as a normal rabbit, sleeping in his cage.

It was all enough to make a human being see just how small they were in the grand scheme of things.

“Hey, you didn't leave anything behind, did you?”

Myuri's casual question made Lawrence peer back behind them in the direction of Lesco. He had come within a stone's throw of starting his dream shop there; he had even made the necessary down payment. And now it was behind him. He had a new direction to take. As a traveler he was used to such fleeting visits, even to the most familiar of villages.

All of these events in Lesco would become little more than a joke to him, something to laugh about with Holo. With that in mind, he looked up to reply to Myuri, telling him that their lives were too short to worry about the bridge they had just crossed, but he stopped. Not because he was unsure of himself, but because Myuri's face was full of surprise. He didn't even have time to wonder why before he heard a hoarse voice painfully speaking behind him.

"Left.. behind.."

"Hildir!"

Lawrence spun around to see what Myuri was looking at, just in time to see the wounded rabbit do his best to lift his head.

"Something.. was left behind.."

He seemed almost delirious from his injuries. He was barely conscious, and couldn't even lift his eyelids, but still used all of his strength to talk. He still hadn't accomplished his mission in Lesco. Myuri walked up to him.

"Hey, rabbit."

He pointed at the injured creature.

"You're injured, so use your head. We're heading south. If you wanna survive, then keep quiet and stay in your cage, huh?"

It seemed rather childish for Myuri to be declaring such things to a rabbit, but Lawrence knew better. Mercenaries moved as a single body, so if their brain wasn't coordinated with their limbs they would fall into chaos.

"Got it?"

Myuri flicked Hildir's chin to make his point. Like a resisting slave, Hildir turned his face away and then closed the one eye he had been straining to keep open, as though he had fainted. With a hum, Myuri continued.

"Well, that's all I can say. Gotta admire that stubborn merchant pride."

Even a veteran of life like Moid was surprised to see an animal speaking. Still, he was a principled mercenary. His type would applaud just about anything, even a rabbit. With his rough hands he covered the rabbit in a blanket as Myuri rose to his feet. And yet, before Myuri could issue any orders they heard another response.

"I left.."

Myuri turned back.

“..a letter behind..”

Myuri was stunned.

“What do you mean, ‘a letter?’”

His wide eyes were looking down on Hildir like they would smite him.

“Hey, are you messing with me?”

Myuri pushed Moid out of the way and yanked Hildir out of the cage.

“Hey, answer me!”

He shook the creature like he was a drunk to be stirred back to consciousness. Moid nervously stopped him, but Hildir didn’t respond. He just left them to stew at his little mystery. After Myuri set him down, he crawled his way back into the cage. Lawrence wouldn’t be surprised if he was smiling all the while.

“Yes.. it might be.. he did ask for Mr. Lawrence’s help.. it’s quite possible..”

Myuri kept getting angrier as he blustered, then shot his eyes up at Lawrence.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

His sharp glare made Lawrence flinch and sit up straight. It felt like being eyed by a beast.

“You’re the one who carried him here. Damn.. just as I was thinking that we’d left all of it behind.”

Myuri was staring right through Lawrence, as if he had divined his thoughts.

“His final request was for your aid, so out with it.. what exactly did he ask for?”

Lawrence’s mind was on the letter, and how hard Hildir had struggled to deliver it to him even though he was dying. There were two letters seeking help from the barons in Sovereign, so he could guess at the contents of the letter Hildir was talking about. If he was writing to the enemies of Diva, then what else could it be? After all, he had come to the back door of an elite band of mercenaries. His pursuers would probably be assuming that he’d come to them for help in the first place.

Lawrence swallowed hard. He felt the sting of utter defeat.

“All I know is that he handed me these letters seeking aid from those who are allied against the Diva company.”

He fetched the letters from his pack and handed them over. He wasn't sure if he ought to have lied and tried to burn the letters, but he was pretty much caught. He wasn't about to burn all of his possessions, and it made sense for Hildir to intentionally leave behind a letter. Surely he must have known how unlikely it was that Lawrence would accept the task, and understood that he himself was dying. He must have known that he might be smuggled out of town against his wishes, and anticipated all of this.

Having fled his company, it would be quite challenging to get anyone to rise up against them. If that was the case, he would probably do one thing: make them chase him. For instance, by leaving a letter somewhere obvious that sought the aid of the Myuri Mercenaries. Perhaps even one as bold as to thank them for help they hadn't even given yet. The moment such a letter was found they would all be chased, regardless of whether it was to prevent them from making any moves or just to punish them.

In fact, Lawrence could practically read the letter in his mind: “My thanks to you, captain Myuri Ruward of the Myuri Mercenary band, for your promising of aid; together we shall retake the Diva company by force!”

“What a rabbit..”

Myuri was grumbling out loud, knowing full well that he couldn't go back to Lesco and plead entrapment. He might as well say that the Devil made him do it, for all the good that would do. Hildir wanted them to go to Sovereign, and now they had to go there. Going south was no longer an option; it was nothing but flat plains all the way to Lesco, and Diva had a lot of men at their disposal. Even a group as strong as the Myuri Mercenaries couldn't hope to win in these conditions.

If there was any high ground to take, or a decent place to dig in for an ambush, they might at least have a momentary advantage. But they couldn't take a chance that Hildir was lying. If he wasn't, their esteemed band was soon to meet its end on their way to the south. Lawrence might not know much about warfare, but he knew that they had no chance without at least some kind of cover. A weaker force needed something to help them, like a hole for a rabbit to scoot into.

“Sovereign.. Sovereign..”

Myuri kept repeating himself, and each time he said so made Lawrence feel even stupider for them having not realized this from the start. It wasn't their fault, of course, Hildir was just that good. With a few simple words he had ruined everything. Even Holo would have flashed him an approving smile. He had leveraged what little power he had left masterfully, and trapped the captain of a mercenary band. He was fit to be the right-hand man of Diva's owner. It made

Lawrence jealous to consider how pathetic a merchant he was by comparison.

“We can’t head south now. We’d be sitting ducks.”

Moid determinedly spoke up.

“But we can’t go east or west either. There’ll either be no water, or it’ll be the same lowlands. So should we try rushing to Lenos regardless? No.. they’ve got boats, so they’ll catch up to us for sure. We can’t get caught up in a fight. We just can’t.”

“I know that.”

Myuri didn’t say anything else, so Moid nodded and continued.

“So we’re only left with going north. We’ll have the cover of the long and narrow roads to the mountains, and the closest one would take us to..”

Moid was quite an excellent right-hand man himself, able to calmly talk about this situation without any trace of spite.

“..Sovereign. It’s the most important place up there, so we’ll hit it no matter which fast road we take.”

“Then this rabbit’s forced us to go down its hole no matter what.”

They were indeed stuck. Despite his experience, all Moid could do was nod in the affirmative without wearing a look of hopelessness or wrath. It seemed that Hildir had won his respect.



“If a single arrow can turn the tables in a battle, so can one sentence from a merchant.”

Myuri readjusted his coat and looked skyward.

“All I can do now is make sure I keep up with the pace of his dance.”

He hopped off the wagon and gathered his forces before issuing his orders. Moid then followed it up with more detailed instructions. Only Lawrence and Hildir were left out of it on the wagon. Hildir had impressed the two mercenaries, and made Lawrence his clown.

It was clear why he was the number two in a big mining firm while Lawrence was just a traveling peddler. Lawrence could only blame his lack of ability and shoot Hildir an envious glare. But he quickly turned back. If a merchant as talented as Hildir was useless right now, what good was a stupid one like him? His spirit was crushed.

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Loss was unavoidable in commercial activities, no matter how hard one tried to prevent it. All merchants could do was try to minimize that loss, so that it would be easier to recover from it.

Mercenaries had similar problems. They had to fight to work, and had little in the way of job security. Severe injury was not uncommon, especially when it came to defending one's flag.

This time they had to take a huge risk to stay alive. Going south would likely doom them, all because of Hildir. The Myuri Mercenaries were forced to turn around and head to Sovereign.

They had to cover a lot of ground that night, because once Diva company declared them their enemy they would have no room for error. Of course, traveling on snowy roads at night was no small feat.

Slipping down a slope might mean becoming lost, and so the mercenaries' leadership had sent ahead a few scouts to verify how bad the road ahead was. Torches were used to signal their positions.

Lawrence would have been impressed by their organization, but this wasn't the time to marvel at such things. An attack could come at any second and Lawrence was already enough of a burden on them.

Hildir, with his sharp mind, had been given extra care and attention. He was moved to the wagon the mercenaries used to cart their goods. Lawrence, on the other hand, wasn't cut out to be a look-out and was even having trouble just keeping up with them.

His wagon wasn't the right type to be taken over such terrain, especially not in the snow. The wheels had been caught several times in the snow, and despite the mercenaries' wagon having

the same problem, at least it was full of their own belongings.

Myuri and Moid seemed upbeat, but the others were not. Lawrence felt downright awful to ask for their help. The frown on his face was proof of just how pessimistic he was right now; from his glances at Myuri and Moid's map things didn't look good.

He still had enough hope to think he was worrying too much, but his mind was already trying to choose whether he would inevitably have to say, “well, at least we made it this far” or, “damn, if only we could make it past that.”

Eventually, his fears began to come true about the time that everyone should have been eating breakfast. The slope had become too steep, the road was now too narrow. There was no way for a wagon to continue.

Moid instructed his men to unload their wagon and turn it over. They skillfully removed the wheels and converted it into a sled. That was the right kind of equipment for the northlands, after all, but Lawrence's wagon wasn't that fancy.

However, his wagon wasn't cheap either. He climbed down and trudged on in the snow beside it, pulling his horse's reins behind him. He only noticed how much he was sweating when he paused, and the cold sent a chill through him.

No, that wasn't why his spine was tingling. It was because Moid was running back to him, and Lawrence knew what he was going to say.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

It was normal to see such a pained look on the face of a traveling mercenary, but merchants like Lawrence were too good at reading the expression: it was all too obvious that Moid was coming to persuade him.

“Let me guess: my wagon?”

Lawrence cut to the chase, and Moid stared at him sincerely before nodding.

“I know it's tough, as a merchant.”

Please let the wagon go. He couldn't say it plainly. Lawrence had purchased this wagon to achieve his dream of becoming a merchant capable of selling anything but his own life. For years now, it had carried his life.

By all rights he should have lost it years ago, when a wheel got stuck so deep in the mud that he almost had to abandon it. He didn't allow that to happen though. And now, even though he had taken extra good care of his wagon, that time had finally come.

“I've already prepared myself for that.”

He put on the toughest smile he could manage, but the fact was that this was far more painful to him than having to give up that shop in Lesco after paying the processing fees.

Moid was a mercenary who lived a life of cruelty compared to merchants. He had to know how sore a blow this was to Lawrence, but didn't offer any comfort or pity. He only gave another serious nod and asked his men to help load Lawrence's goods onto his horse or their own cart.

“Time to go.”

It was all over in an instant. Time was precious, and traveling took a lot of time. The mercenaries had to press on without resting. Still, the snow reflected the torchlight far enough for Lawrence to see his abandoned wagon when he finally looked back.

He didn't blame anyone; he just felt like he'd lost a part of himself. He wished Holo was there with him, but there was no telling when he'd see her again. For now he had to keep up so he wouldn't be left behind too.

If a fight broke out that was very possible. The sight of his cart receding into darkness felt like an omen of doom and shook him to his core. He had to keep up with them to stay safe.

Before long, they arrived at a safehouse for travelers and took turns to rest. The sun rose as they did so, but Myuri didn't get to see his beloved sunrise; there was just enough cloud cover to obscure it this time.

They were still three or four days from Sovereign. They could cover the distance, but it took time for such a large party to move together. Thankfully, their adversaries would have the same problem, so Myuri and Moid didn't see this as an issue. They had to figure out what to do when they arrived at their destination.

“Sovereign's supposed to be a vital hub in the north.”

The moment they left the safehouse - a common sight in snowy lands - they prepared for the next leg of their journey and Moid began their heated discussion.

“I doubt there will be many who'll fight up there.”

“Meaning they won't be able to turn the tides?”

Moid stayed silent, but not because he was unsure of himself. Just from the look in Myuri's eyes it was clear that what he was saying was trustworthy.

“This is the letter Mr.Lawrence got.”

Myuri read that letter next to the map, starting from the Diva company stamp that Hildir had personally placed on it. It was a simple letter, and to the point. It evoked an image of wisdom.

That is, it would have had Hildir's handwriting not made it clear that he was nervous. He hadn't even had the time to wait for the ink to dry, and despite its important contents, he hadn't managed to seal it with wax.

“He's requested the help of the barons north of Sovereign too.. why?”

“Kristoph von Hebrasche the Third? Wasn't he the baron that steers clear of Diva, but never makes a move against them either?”

“What the heck's Hildir thinking?”

Moid went silent again after Myuri said that. He was still stroking his beard when he replied.

“I've heard nothing about that baron that instills any confidence, but he has a lot of land and controls many of the roads north of the mountains. If we're gonna travel north of Sovereign then we'll have to take those. Anyone wanting to do business that far north has to cut across his land. Even Diva would have to, I suspect.”

“Ah, so he's the type that just sits back and enjoys living off of tariffs?”

“I think so. He's made it so far only because he has a choice piece of land. I don't know how bright he is, but I do know that some of his predecessors were pretty good men.”

“I can see why he doesn't instill any confidence.”

Myuri was barely able to murmur that reply. The sky was clearing, but the same wind doing that was shifting the snow drifts before them. The clouds forbade a shorter day than usual, but they couldn't get hung up on that right now.

“So our only choice is to head to Sovereign, but..”

Myuri sighed in mid-sentence.

“We can't go any further, can we?”

“Nope. Not enough food. Beyond Sovereign there's nothing but scattered villages. Even if they're willing to help us, they won't have enough to keep us all supplied.”

Even if they lived up to the mercenaries' reputation and passed through the villages like a swarm of locusts, there just wasn't enough to sustain them. Especially during winter. Their food was running out, and all that was left was either dry or already nibbled by mice. No matter where they went in the winter their lives were at risk.

Lawrence's first customers were villages like that; the kind that even other traveling peddlers wouldn't bother visiting. He knew just how bad it would be this time of year for a village like that. If the mercenaries "paid them a visit" right now, they wouldn't survive.

"A flawless plan, huh? Lead us to our doom right in the nest of our enemies."

Despite saying so, Myuri seemed more relaxed now. He wasn't giving up, of course, not when Hildir's plan was so outstanding it covered so many bases. There was a reason that he trapped Lawrence in this plan as well.

"So, will we be able to meet up with Holo?"

Myuri stopped staring at the map and asked about that very reason. Holo was effectively their wildcard, the only card in their hand that could win this round.

"If things went smoothly, she should be in Lesco today or tomorrow."

Of course they wouldn't have gone that smoothly.

"What'll she do when she sees that Diva's been over-run? Will she come looking for us?"

Lawrence was impressed that Hildir had considered all of this beforehand.

"When he handed me the letters, Hildir told me that if anything should happen we should head to Sovereign. Apparently he told his friend the same thing, the guy he sent with Holo."

"Ah."

Myuri took a deep breath. Somehow, he seemed as confident as a bear now, like he was breathing in the cold air to shock himself into calming down.

"I feel a bit pathetic about it, but it'll be good to have her power with us."

Neither Myuri nor his mercenaries had ever seen Holo's true form, but they still knew much more of her legend than Lawrence did.

"Throw a man into battle unarmed, and he'll flee. But throw him in with a weapon, even if it's just a knife, he'll surprise you with his courage. Greenhorns will even tie their spears to their hands for their first fight.. I still remember doing that myself."

"Do you.. really have that much faith in Holo?"

The leader of a mercenary band should never say 'yes' to something like that. And yet, Myuri still closed one eye, raised his hand to his chin, and replied.

“Since you're this calm, I know she must be great.”

It wasn't an affirmation of his appreciation, but it was close enough.

“..yeah. If she meets up with us, she'll be a great asset, but..”

Lawrence didn't want Holo to fight. He was going to say so, but Myuri stopped him.

“Let's just stick to the most important details for now.”

His meaning was clear: don't say it. Lawrence couldn't get angry about it, though. As a merchant, he was just happy he wasn't being ignored right now.

“Then we're still heading to Sovereign for now?”

They were going straight to the rebels that had caused Diva to start this war. The very war that Myuri wanted Yoitsu to not get swept into. It was almost comical to consider that they were heading to the rebels now. Thankfully, Myuri wasn't some limp-wristed kid that had been bested by a rabbit, but a man who could gaze at his map and talk so confidently while having a drink.

“If things look too bad, we'll just take all their food and run.”

It was a horrible thing to hear, but mercenaries were mercenaries.

“Alright.. let's go!”

They were capable men, but they lived in a world that was completely different from Lawrence's. Without the Wisewolf there with him, he couldn't even hear those laughs, let alone smile at that joke.

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Hildir woke up after lunch, but since they were on the move again neither Moid nor Myuri had any time to care for the rabbit. On top of that, none of the other mercenaries knew his true identity, so responsibility for him fell onto Lawrence again.

“Feed him well!”

The men laughed at Lawrence. Since Moid and Myuri were quiet about things, they all knew it was a merchant that had forced them on this trip to Sovereign. Who else could that mean except Lawrence?

None of them wanted to approach Lawrence, even the ones in front of him and behind him

steered clear. It was a natural reaction, they were on their defensive. If he made the wrong move they could rush in with their spears. Luckily nothing like that had happened yet.

Hildir, though awake, was staying quiet. He seemed to have realized the situation they were in.

“We can talk if we stay quiet.”

Lawrence placed a soaking cloth in front of Hildir, who sniffed it and took it into his mouth. For a while he just sucked the water from that cloth and blinked his eyes.

“Are we heading there now?”

Since he was asking so directly, Lawrence was now certain that he had lied about leaving behind a letter.

“Hopefully we'll make it.”

Staying vague was all the revenge Lawrence could muster. Hildir's breathing stopped for a while, then he slowly exhaled. Lawrence replaced the cloth, and he resumed drinking. Clearly he was feeling a lot better now.

“Where.. are we now?”

He spoke softly, but it wasn't because he was trying to stay quiet; he was just that weak.

“We've been crossing the mountains. We passed the first one this morning. If you look eastward you'll spot in. There's another one to the north.”

If Hildir was conscious enough he'd be able to piece the rest together himself. Indeed, he nodded.

“And Ms. Holo?”

Even Hildir was asking about Holo. Everyone wanted her to save them. Every time he heard that, Lawrence died a little on the inside. He didn't know whether to feel guilty about putting her in this position, or jealous that she was so useful. He ended up feeling both.

“Not yet. But you said it yourself, huh? She'll end up in Lesco first before she comes after us.”

“Yes.. there are only a few roads, so my friend should find us soon enough..”

Humans had come to rule the land and sea, but the sky still belonged to the birds. Lawrence didn't have the heart to even nod back. He just held a piece of bread out toward him.

“Want some?”

“I don’t know.. if I can swallow it..”

“I’ll soften it with water.”

Lawrence hadn't taken care of many ill animals, and all he knew how to make was a buckwheat or bread porridge and all he could do was try to get them to swallow it somehow. Hildir acknowledged that much, so at least Lawrence didn't have to pry his jaw open.

“I can't help the taste, though.”

Lawrence offered the bread after dripping some water onto it with the cloth. Hildir closed his eyes as he tried to painfully swallow the bread, but shook his head after a few tries.

“Damn.”

“What?”

“I'm.. so..”

Hearing his hoarse voice made Lawrence laugh. But it wasn't out of sympathy, but self-mockery.

“With just one sentence, you made Mr. Ruward do something you couldn't even have paid him to do. What more do you want?”

Hildir studied Lawrence out of the corner of his eye; that was his plotting pose. He might be weak, but those eyes of his kind never betrayed his emotions.

“True.. being too greedy leads to losing everything..”

“Just like your enemies.”

His eyes closed once more, this time with a bitter smile.

“Is anyone after us?”

“No news yet. But we'll know by tomorrow. The scouts should be back by then.”

Diva could be giving chase, or they might simply ignore their small band. They might be too worried about Hildir's disappearance to suspect that he was with them. Even if they put two and two together, they might choose to ignore it. People often took the easy way out, even if it was hard to believe that they would overlook someone as important as Hildir.

“Get some more sleep. It doesn't matter what I think, you're the important one here. We'll

probably need your help when push comes to shove, there's nothing a peddler like me can offer.”

Lawrence was greatly impressed by Hildir's cunning. Even Myuri had been bested. Lawrence was practically a fifth wheel, only useful because he was with Holo. That realization was the last thing Lawrence needed; a merchant should never lose their confidence, even if they had to lick the sole of another man's shoe. He knew that, but also that he was practically useless now.

“..I'll do that, then..”

Hildir replied without taking his eye off of Lawrence. He didn't laugh, though. He knew that a top-tier merchant shouldn't do something so nasty. Lawrence closed his own eyes, and covered Hildir with a blanket.

If Holo saw his face right now, he would get a kick for sure. That only made him feel more awful. He was simply outclassed by Hildir, and back to being a normal merchant again. Everyone was waiting for Holo now, and focusing on that wouldn't improve his mood.

An amusing thought then dawned on him. Somewhere along the way, he'd started feeling like a wolf himself. Maybe he'd just been with Holo for too long. It didn't matter, though, so he smiled to himself and kept walking along with the mercenaries.

He was actually starting to miss the old days, when he would walk around by his lonesome. That was his entire life before he'd met Holo, and yet it somehow felt novel. In fact he couldn't really remember that time clearly. It surprised him that he was so used to traveling with Holo.

They climbed a slope and passed around a frozen marsh by following the tracks of some rabbits and deer. The sun was now directly overhead, and almost seemed to be racing off to the horizon to avoid the cold.

It was about time to ask Holo what she wanted for supper. Lawrence looked up with that thought, and a mercenary looked up as well. They were still watching him closely. His desire to see Holo intensified.

He soon caught sight of a mercenary running up to them, but ultimately the man ran by them and all that was left was Lawrence's longing to see Holo. Every time he missed her like this, he was reminded of just how much he loved her.

A short while later the mercenaries stopped and Myuri had them gather around him. Apparently they were being pursued. Lawrence nervously listened as Myuri spoke to his men.

“The news just came in: someone is chasing us from Lesco.”

They went dead silent, just like the frozen surface of the lake they had just passed. They were

waiting for their captain to relay his orders. Satisfied, their captain continued.

“They outnumber us by three or four times.”

Someone sucked in a deep breath, but they otherwise maintained the proud form of the bravest of mercenary bands. They calmly waited for Myuri to continue.

“They may be rich, but they're hardly the knights of some duke. At best they're on our level, especially when it comes to fighting in the mountains. They'll be a good test of our courage!”

Myuri was continuing on with the theme of “reorienting, not retreating.” Some of the men were chuckling under their breath, but not out of spite. A captain normally downplayed their opponent's skills so his men weren't afraid, but Myuri was being honest with them.

He might be asking them to be careful or just reminding them that they had nowhere to run. Running deep into the mountains off these narrow roads wasn't going to yield any food, only death. Battle was their only option. This cornered mouse had to attack the cat.

“Who are they?”

One of the men finally spoke up. No one turned their head, because they were all waiting for the captain to answer. In their profession, everyone knew their competitors. If they knew who it was coming after them, they would at least know their strength and fighting ability. The situation wouldn't improve, but the knowledge could at least provide some comfort.

“You really wanna know?”

Myuri was dead serious. The men started talking amongst themselves. Even Lawrence swallowed nervously. Maybe they wouldn't feel any more comfortable knowing it this time. But they hardly had a choice but to fight, and as mercenaries they lived for thrill of combat, so the man giving the group a voice urged Myuri on.

“Yeah.. who is it?”

It went deadly silent again, and people even stopped breathing. Myuri finally replied.

“The Hugo Mercenaries.”

Lawrence knew that name from Lesco; they were lead by a man named Reginald. Diva couldn't afford to be careless this time, so regardless of what the Myuri Mercenaries were after, they had sent the best men after them.

Lawrence felt his fists clench; he was seriously thinking he might not get out of this situation this time. And yet.. the men all protested.

“Damn!”

“How terrifying!”

The laughed and shouted, raising their arms and weapons like they were disappointed. Lawrence had no idea what was going on.

“Hey now, don't be that way. Before I knew who it was, I was just as anxious. But Reginald, that magnificent bastard.. well, they got so much money that they wanna share the wealth!”

As Myuri happily announced that, his men loudly booed the Hugo Mercenaries. Lawrence was still perplexed.

“Oh, very well! Let's have some fun with them, they could use the exercise!”

Myuri handed it over to Moid.

“Get your britches on! We're leaving! If you hope to have a ceiling over your head tonight, then don't fall behind!”

Even with Moid loudly issuing the order, the men didn't reply with any enthusiasm. They returned to their groups with nary a trace of tension. What was going on? Had they spoken to Hugo in advance? Myuri *was* friends with Reginald, but weren't mercenaries ruled by money? Having returned to his horse, Lawrence looked up at Hildir.

“What happened?”

The ruckus had woken Hildir up, but Lawrence had no choice but to catch up to the team before they left him behind. His reply was brief.

“We're being pursued.”

Hildir didn't react with surprise or anxiety, just a dispirited stare.

“They sure don't sound worried..”

Lawrence plucked the cage off of his horse, and let Hildir mull it over for a while.

“So they're all friends..”

Hildir sighed, clearly having pieced it together as well.

“For real?”

Lawrence's questions made Hildir's ears stand on-end.

“Quite. Mercenaries aren't as rude as they'd have people believe. They're hardly the type that would do anything for money. They don't like doing battle with their peers.”

Lawrence already knew that mercenaries weren't what he expected, especially after the last few days. However, that was of no immediate comfort to him.

“Then hiring them must be like herding cats.”

Hildir finally smiled. Lawrence had only ever lived as the one being attacked by mercenaries, not the one hiring them.

“In war it all comes down to the knights and the mercenaries. Mercenaries are there to intimidate and capture people for money. They don't destroy villages or towns unless they have to. You.. saw how they lived in Lesco, yes? How friendly the bands are with each other?”

It was true. Back in Lesco, even Myuri had been reduced to a drunken mess from all his meetings with the other bands. He'd drunk the whole night away when the new currency was announced. Hildir sighed when he saw Lawrence nod.

“Many bands have a proud history, and they've fought side by side with each other for most of that history. Mercenaries have their own code.”

“Then-”

“Yes, mercenaries aren't hired to start fights, but to finish them. If they must, they'll destroy towns and villages, but never other mercenaries - especially not the ones they're friendly with. It'd be a waste of time and money to try hiring them for that..”

Hildir tucked his head back under the blanket and squinted out through the opening. He looked a bit too ashamed to be talking about such men when he'd let himself be captured by them.

“..it seems the barons are running things now.. oh, how pathetic.. my poor company..”

Hildir couldn't even bear to finish his thought. He just smiled in shame.

“Well, at least they're not in the same league as a certain merchant.”

Lawrence wasn't sure what to say, but figured the truth was good enough. Myuri had praised Reginald in much the same way for being paid to essentially chase his friends and do nothing. If Myuri planned to play along and maintain the status quo, then Lawrence might as well do the same.

“Then it looks like they've finally found a way out of this.”

Hildir cut in while Lawrence was thinking.

“Oh?”

“If this is their choice then either Ms. Holo can't help us, or..”

Hildir trailed off and stared into the distance. Lawrence couldn't hope to keep up with his thoughts, so he just let him think about the big problems. Only someone from his world knew how to deal with such grand scales of money trouble anyway, and Lawrence's chance to enter that world had already passed.

“Thirsty?”

Hearing his question, Hildir finally turned back and politely replied.

“Yes, please.”

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They were finally overtaken the next afternoon. The men from Diva demanded that they turn Hildir over and surrender, making it clear to Myuri that they were trying to trap them by mentioning Hildir.

But Hildir already vanished earlier that night. They had already seen through Diva and it didn't matter what the circumstances were, and mercenaries never surrendered. No one would hire a bunch of turncoats or cowards, so when the going got tough they dug in for battle.

Rather than surrender, they simply "lost" their charges. Better for them to vanish than be captured or swept up into battle; that was how mercenaries guarded their reputations.

“Attack!”

Diva company were probably scared of starting the war themselves and wanted a scapegoat. Hildir, having fled with the Myuri Mercenaries, would be the perfect motivation for them to have done all of this. And yet, they didn't approach. They simply fired arrows.

A veritable hail of arrows landed on both sides of the fray, with the mercenaries shielding themselves with wooden boards and hoping to find a chance to charge. Only two men had been injured so far, both while retrieving as many arrows that had been fired as possible.

Arrows were unbelievably varied, being bought from so many different sources. They were always used, over and over again, and the ones being fired now were so dull they had only injured two people. They were no threat unless one was struck in a vital organ; even a child could escape this onslaught unscathed.

It was only the shouting and the clouds of arrows that gave the illusion that this was a desperate battle. And desperate it seemed, at least to the Diva company representative that Lawrence was watching. The man nervously watched the scene with a grim look on his face.

“A great merchant can move goods and servants while he sits on a chair, but that just detaches him from reality. It isn't that these guys are stupid, they're just lazy.”

“It's almost embarrassing.”

Between the men, they could see the captains on their horses and the sleds carrying goods. Moid, being the commander of Myuri's forces, was barking orders from the rear. He sometimes trod forward for more wine, which only made it clear just how much of a farce this whole thing was.

“I can only assume they've completely pulled the wool over the eyes of the Diva representative. What say you?”

“Seems likely. I wouldn't be surprised if he's never been on the battlefield.”

Hildir probably knew the man personally, so he should know if that was the truth.

“A typical noble, then? Sharp mind, frail body, showing off his knowledge by writing his name in the Church language? Is that what you're saying?”

Myuri raised one his legs up onto his horse's back, then rested his chin on his knee. His sharp gaze and devil-may-care pose really made him seem like the veteran mercenary that he was. However, Hildir wasn't so charmed that he couldn't fire back a lackadaisical reply of his own.

“Why ask me when you trust your eyes?”

Myuri stared at Hildir, but the rabbit didn't move. It only yawned, making Myuri hum and end the topic with an “alright.”

“That just means we don't have to worry about getting to Sovereign. I meant no ill will toward your former friend.”

“My friend? The compatriot of the barons who did this? Hardly. I just don't figure they would send someone like him out with that force to greet us. He's too young, to begin with. They must be planning something.”

“..Something that he knows, and has to make sure happens.”

“Exactly.”

Myuri and Hildir could understand each other well, and were both calm. One had cheated the

other, but they didn't squabble over it. It would change nothing, so being constructive was the obvious way to go. These great minds were already chatting like fast friends.

“Then your plan is still intact, and we need only continue forward, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, so you *are* certain of your plan's success.”

It would have been ridiculous for the chief of a mercenary band to talk to a rabbit, so Lawrence stood with them next to a horse and held Hildir's cage. Anyone listening in would assume Myuri was talking with Lawrence, especially since Lawrence hadn't used his own voice. He just stood there the whole time, playing his role.

“..yes.”

Myuri smiled.

“Liar. You had no idea until you saw that they sent Reginald after us.”

He spoke with a slightly impetuous tone, but that only made Myuri sound even wiser. Even the nicest tool was essentially just dead weight to someone who didn't know how to use it. Like Hildir, Myuri would have figured out all he needed to know about Diva the moment the Hugo mercenaries arrived.

“The barons are over-exerting themselves. They're so blinded by profit that they're using force to solve all of their problems. And you're using that against them.”

“Of course. The numbers just don't add up, everything's a joke right down to how they're distributing their forces. They're probably still just sitting around in their office at Diva company.”

Lawrence wasn't sure what Hildir meant, but Myuri suddenly laughed out loud.

“Fighters like me are useless around that kind of table. The captain of a small band of mercenaries like me isn't fit to look at the faces seated around such a table in such a great company.”

Despite sounding sarcastic, Myuri was actually being sincere. Hildir could take no pleasure from it, but he wasn't a rookie. He breathed a happy sigh that made Lawrence think of Holo's antics.

“It's clear what kind of people have taken over the company now, so all the people rebelling against us in the past will be doubly inspired to defeat these barons.”

“In other words, the moment they hear you're in Sovereign they'll come to talk, already

prepared for a chance?”

“They might even come to me and ask me for help. It's a very real possibility, in fact.”

Once they'd heard his case, they might even elect to allow Diva a return to grace. They had, after all, been willing to deal with everyone, and gathered so many barons together for a common good.

“Once we arrive, those who weren't aware of the situation will feel even more empowered to see that a smaller force survived a full-out assault from one that is much stronger.”

“I agree. More people should come out of the woodwork, just like you say, until we have enough force to push them back. That's what you mean, yes? Given how strong they are, no baron could afford to risk longer-term plans, and all the merchants who realize what those guys just did will want revenge. They'll prefer having everything back to the way it was over what's happening now.”

“True, merchants do live and breathe in terms of profit and loss, after all.”

Myuri laughed again, unable to comment on the ways of merchants.

“Then I take it you've also thought about how to repay us once the winds start blowing in your favor again?”

That was Myuri's way to joke in a merchant-like manner, considering the salaries that his men would be expecting for such a ploy. However, they weren't driven by profit as much as sustaining their band, which made his joke that much sharper.

“Of course. A merchant's thanks always comes in the form of money.”

Hildir seemed to be firing back his own joke in response to Myuri's earlier satire. After chuckling for a while, Myuri responded.

“Okay, okay, I get it. I really do. But still..”

That was the first point in their conversation that Myuri had yielded to Hildir, and it piqued Hildir's interest. His ears shot up like Holo's would, and he stared at the mercenary.

“What's the matter?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing.”

Myuri wasn't going to explain himself. He didn't seem to be hiding anything, just working through his bewilderment. After musing for a while, he returned Hildir's stare with eyes that declared he had come to a decision.

“At the start I felt that Diva deserved their destruction, having screwed everything up on their own.”

He wasn't mincing words.

“But suddenly, I might be able to earn my men a tidy profit.”

Hildir just kept staring at Myuri. Saying that was the most natural thing in the world.. for a merchant. They would then realize they were saying too much and become self-aware. But Myuri just smiled and shrugged.

“What a straightforward story. One who's been betrayed wants to win it all back, but he's in a vulnerable state. His enemies are numerous and powerful. He has to bide his time and claw his way back the first chance he sees. And so he pounces on the thin sliver of a chance that the Myuri Mercenaries, who aren't swayed by money, won't be able to help themselves and will make good on their desire to defeat the company they've been working for ever since they arrived in Lesco.”

It was no coincidence that leaders were excellent speakers. Myuri's voice was clear and had that almost seductive quality that his kind should have. Of course it wasn't just because of his voice, but also his confidence. It wasn't enough to just be a serious and realistic man like Moid, a leader had to have a dream that could sway the hearts of his people. Only a serious dreamer could attract a following of like-minded dreamers.

“You see, as far as mercenaries go, we're the real deal. That great leader who once led thousands, John Schravitz, said it best: to be a mercenary you have to make everything bend to your needs. You have to make the sword move the way you want it, and make the meat jump into your maw. You have to fight for every scrap, and become the perfect tool. The kind of tool that only gets better with age.”

He sure had a way with words. Holo would probably be furious if she was there, because Lawrence was picturing Eve, who he saw as just that kind of dreamer - the kind who single-mindedly pursued a throne of solid gold, by any means possible. But Hildir wasn't Holo, and he simply regarded Myuri with a neutral expression, like the big-shot accountant that he was.

“Contracts are only made for trades when both sides will profit. That's a basic principle of commerce.”

He wore his determination like one would expect such an important person in Diva company to wear it. He had planned for the new currency, and made it a reality. He gave mercenaries nightmares. He gave peddlers like Lawrence a legitimate shot at achieving their dreams.

For his part Lawrence admired the man, but not out of jealousy. He truly saw Hildir's greatness.

He was the type of person who could achieve great things, unlike a traveling merchant. He could excite someone like Myuri, and get their eyes to go round and flash him a toothy smile.

In fact, Myuri had good reason to feel like being hired by someone like Hildir, who put the world at his fingertips. If they could re-establish Hildir's dream with their power, and smoothly, then they would no longer even need to worry about Holo and the banned book.

“Just you wait. When you're back on top, we'll come knocking for more than you expect.”

Such bravado was the only way Myuri could cover his embarrassment, but Hildir closed his eyes and happily replied.

“Well, you have your work cut out for you if you want me back on top. Don't get shot now.”

“And don't you end up on someone's dinner plate.”

“Deal.”

They exchanged calm smiles.

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After pausing for a night's rest, the battle resumed the next day. It was still just as much a farce as before. In a way it was fun, since this way no one had to die.

Still, it was amazing to watch the other army approach them for an attack, only to fall back to maintain their defenses. They had little choice, it seemed, since they had the low ground. Moid had cleverly positioned their forces uphill.

To give the illusion of injury, the mercenaries sometimes split sausages and painted themselves with the blood. They had to maintain the facade that they were seriously fighting, after all, so that the Hugo Mercenaries had time to inform them about the situation with the Diva company.

They were even told about the other armies being sent to Sovereign, like old friends helping each other out. It was just as Hildir said; the Diva company's representatives had no idea what was really going on. They were only used to moving money around, and were being played for fools.

Myuri left Moid in charge of the battle and managed things behind the scenes. He sent scouts ahead to investigate Sovereign, to make sure that they wouldn't be caught by Diva on the way and branded as traitors to be destroyed. They also had to make sure the city could put up a fight; Diva was still a force to be reckoned with.

“Looks like we were right.”

Myuri yawned from his perch on his horse.

“They're not quick enough on the uptake to adapt their plans.”

“For good or ill.”

Hildir's comment made Myuri pout and shrug.

“Quite. At least I can look forward to those guys in Sovereign.”

“Hmm? I wouldn't know, I've never dealt with them.”

“Sure. I mean, they at least have walls. With things like taxes, guilds, and regulations they can keep careful tabs on supply and demand to maintain their prices. It's far easier to judge their quality compared to those who run a place with none of those things.”

Hildir sniffled and his nose quivered.

“They hardly sound trustworthy.”

It was a comeback that only someone like Hildir, who had been betrayed, could make. Myuri smiled and patted his horse.

“We'll see when we get there. It'll be the day after tomorrow at the latest. Well, let's stop the chit chat. We still have to think about how we'll get away from Reginald.”

It was actually quite a conundrum; since they weren't really fighting, it was all the harder to escape. They also needed to make a show of it so the people of Sovereign would be taken in.

“What's their next move gonna be?”

Myuri stared at the next hill, trying to plan a way to move on so they wouldn't be attacked on their way there. They needed a good strategy, and yet Hildir had no compunction to help. He just stayed under his blanket to shield himself from the cold.

It wasn't as though a brilliant mind could conjure up the answer from nothing; they could only find the best solution if they had all the necessary information. Unlike traveling merchants, those who worked at a large firm had clearly-defined roles.

It took a sharp mind to divide the labor. Even if the person doing so was Holo, Lawrence wasn't sure if she was brave enough to make those kinds of decisions.. especially since it sometimes involved deciding who lived and died. But people like Hildir had that kind of bravery; they were in a league of their own.

Lawrence had been treated like an outsider even since they left Lesco. The pressure was enormous, but he was still hanging in there. In fact he was able to see the bright side; this way he finally got to live in the same world that such strong people lived in.

As the morning sun climbed higher into the sky, everyone ate and made merry. Scouts returned, faces covered in pig blood, and joined in the revelry. It was then that a messenger finally dropped into this calm atmosphere.

“What? You want us to fight close-quarters?”

Myuri had halted his horse as the Hugo messenger knelt beside him.

“Yes. That guy from Diva is like a spectre over our heads. He seems to be getting bored and is wondering when the real fight will start.”

“Ah..”

Myuri shut his eyes and put his hand under his chin. He wasn't that young, so perhaps his face just didn't like to grow hair. Whatever the reason, there was no beard on his chin so it seemed rather quaint for him to strike such a pose.

“That means we'll end up sending captives, yes?”

“Yes. The chief will hand over four, and asks you to hand us around fifteen men in turn.”

“What?”

Myuri's tone changed, and his voice rang out almost like a wolf's howl. Even the wolves around him seemed nervous now, judging by the looks on their faces. It was a heavy demand; even Lawrence could see that. Myuri's wasn't a large band, so it would be a sore loss for them to send over fifteen men. And who would they send, when everyone felt they couldn't afford to be lost? It wasn't good.

“Are you implying that it would only take four of you to best fifteen of us?”

Even if they were friends with a gentleman's agreement, there was only so much they could tolerate.

“No, no. Our chief just seems to have an idea.”

Myuri scratched his nose and proudly replied.

“Go on.”

“With this, our chief is going to declare an ultimatum to negotiate a hostage exchange.”

“A hostage exchange?”

Myuri immediately asked, and looked over at Moid.

“Yes. There's no point annihilating each other, so this will give us a chance to negotiate. Our chief will represent our side with the guy from Diva, and Mr. Myuri and another will represent your side.”

Lawrence could see it now: two captains and the Diva representative facing each other on the snowy hill. One side had less than half the forces, but still fought on. The other side was backed by Diva and had the overwhelming advantage, so surrender was the only reasonable option. It was obvious. Why be proud now? Lawrence could practically hear the Diva representative's voice issuing the ultimatum.

“So, that's their game? Such a hopelessly naive merchant thinks we'll just give up because he says so?”

The Hugo messenger finally smiled, but it was fleeting. His stoic expression quickly returned.

“You will of course be furious during the negotiations, as our chief arrogantly makes unreasonable demands. And when the fool drops his guard, you capture him. That wouldn't be a problem for you, and we'd have no choice but to release our hostages and watch you flee. This way we'll be able to report that we did everything asked of us to the best of our abilities.”

“And you think this will actually work? That he's that much of a fool?”

The messenger sighed.

“He's arrogant to a fault. I have no idea how our chief has put up with him. If it was me, I'd have killed him long ago.”

The messenger casually expressed his thoughts like this was a simple chat, and threw in a final line to underscore his point.

“That's how we all feel.”

“Alright. We've been trying to find a way to get to Sovereign anyhow, so this should work. I'm glad to hear that Hugo's chief has beat me to such a solid plan.”

“He'll be pleased to hear that you said that. So, that's the plan.”

“Got it. We'll need some time to arrange it.. give us enough time to coordinate, okay?”

“I'll go tell our chief.”

Myuri smiled. He was looking forward to wrapping everything up.

“We'll let you know where the ‘fight’ will take place, and how it should go. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

The still-kneeling messenger bowed low before scurrying off in the snow. In fact, he almost looked like a rabbit as he quickly ran into the nearby bushes.

“You heard him. I need you to pick fifteen unlucky men. Use all the pig's blood and prepare for the arrangement. Just like that time in Lesso Valley, got it?”

“Got it. I'll also send scouts out to find the best place for the battle.”

“Very good.”

Everyone scurried off to get their jobs done. It didn't take as long as one might think to set up a drama that was even more grandly farcical than the one Lawrence had seen in that town square in Lesco. He was surprised by how efficiently they got it done. They were as relaxed as playing children.

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They were situated on two hills overlooking a flat valley. It was a seasonal river, and the bed was now dry and covered in snow. The perfect place for a battle. Myuri and Reginald, the two captains, surveyed each other's forces from their hills.

The soldiers stood on the slopes of the hills below them, making it clear just how outnumbered Myuri's men were. That said, history was rife with battles where the lesser force defeated the greater one, so his men were hardly discouraged. At least that's how it seemed from a distance.

“Has everyone bloodied up their blades?”

Despite Myuri putting it that way, the 'blades' might as well be sharpened sticks. They had arranged this meeting to make it look like they had no way to escape Hugo's forces, and had to fight, even impressing Lawrence with the show they were putting on. Moid had done well. Not to be outdone, the Hugo Mercenaries were also putting on a good show. Even knowing it was all a mock battle, the leadership proudly strode down to initiate battle in the valley below.

“They're using old weapons too. That way they can say they were ruined in the battle and get paid more in compensation.”

“My, how admirable. Us too?”

Myuri looked back at the speaker, but of course it wasn't Lawrence. Hildir's cage was in Lawrence's hands, with the rabbit's ears flopping out over the edges. He didn't move, but since he was the one who'd hired Myuri he had to take it. Merchants weren't only honor-bound by written contracts, but also verbal ones. Myuri chuckled until Moid chimed in.

“Anyway. What's important now is whether we've followed the plan. You're sure we haven't missed anything?”

“Definitely. I spoke to them, and everyone's ready. It'll be fine.”

“Really?”

Myuri slowly exhaled. He was acting rather lazy because everything was staged, but it wouldn't do to have unnecessary casualties. They couldn't let regrets like that slip in, and still had to make sure that all the people who'd hired them were satisfied in the end. Even a farce had to be carried out properly.

Even so, he was hardly the only one responsible for thinking things through. Every mercenary had to know what was happening, or they wouldn't make it. It didn't come down to money, and it didn't come down to who could threaten the loudest.

All who attuned their minds to the life of a mercenary had to live by their principles. A traveling merchant might be able to see all of the edges of the world's occupations, but no matter how much money they had they couldn't see everything beyond those edges.

Money only solved so much. Lawrence wished it wasn't so, and even Hildir ran his company with such a wish, but the world wasn't ready for that mindset. The best they could do was construct a grand stage production like this.

That strong-looking man from the other hill had to be Reginald. He almost looked like a younger version of Moid, with red hair and skin so tan it looked like he spent all of his time under the sun, in spite of the season.

His arms were folded across his chest, emphasizing his prominent musculature. He looked at Myuri and nodded, who in turn nodded back at Moid. Many people had gathered, but none of them so much as sneezed. It was Reginald who broke the tension.

“Ho, brave warriors! We'll honor your choice to fight and show our respect by doing our best as well!”

Voices carried poorly on a field of snow, but Reginald's was sharp and clear. Myuri replied as he raised his sword.

“We fight by God's will! Born by the sword, we enact His judgment on His betrayers! But we

shall not fight a coward's fight, stabbing at them from behind! We shall return your respect and do our utmost to face the glorious Hugo Mercenaries!”

It was such a colossally silly formality that Lawrence nearly laughed. It was all the funnier knowing that it was just a fraud. Reginald reacted with obvious fury at his words, standing up taller and matching the anger of the Diva representative beside him.

In reality that representative was probably the only one who was taking this so seriously, although Myuri and Reginald also had to take this seriously. And, since they were celebrating their principles, Holo would be seriously enjoying this as well.

“Then let Lacotyr, the God of War, reveal the Truth!”

Reginald raised his axe in turn, and every soldier present followed suit. It was a rare thing to behold over a hundred warriors raising their weapons together, and it reminded Lawrence of the heroic tales of dragon-slaying that he enjoyed as a youth. His heart was beating furiously.

“Our foes are not to be trifled with, so let's show them what we're made of!!”

With Myuri's declaration the fight began, and soldiers spilled into the valley below. Diva's representative seemed to be about Lawrence's age, and was just as excited by the proceedings. He bellowed along, and had he a sword of his own, he might have rushed in with the others.

That was just how men were; staying calm in this kind of atmosphere was impossible. Even the most un-warlike merchant would be swept away. It made Lawrence finally see the appeal of choosing such a dangerous life of spite over one driven by profit.

No other occupation gave one this brand of excitement. On the battlefield it all came down to whoever was strongest. Even a child could prove themselves. Holo would be cheering with excitement too, if she could even hold herself back from assuming wolf form.

Lawrence smiled at that thought, until he noticed that Hildir was stirring. The moment he looked down at the rabbit, he heard a voice.

“What is so funny?”

“Nothing, I-”

He couldn't believe his ears, and spun around to see none other than Holo.

“Holo!!”

He shouted out loud, and she closed her eyes, clearly upset. Because of his outburst, everyone would know she was here now. Seeing a girl on the battlefield was odd enough, but now they knew there was a flesh and blood wolf in their midst.

“H-how long ago did you get back?”

“I arrived at the town the day before last, but was delayed there by some business.”

She seemed exhausted, and her face was covered in dust. She had just run a circuit that would take a human seven days, so even a horse would be mush now. But none of that really mattered to Lawrence right now; he was so thrilled to see her after what felt like a decade (even if it was only a week).

“Really..? Oh whatever, as long as you're alright-”

She cut him off.

“Wait, why is the rabbit here?”

His mouth froze, and he felt like a young apprentice again. He was so confused that he even felt like he was talking to his old master again, even though it was someone entirely different before him. It was the second time he felt this way, the previous being the moment he saw her again in the Pazzio sewers.

“There was an unexpected turn of events.”

Myuri was the one who replied. Holo might look like an ordinary girl, but Myuri had to answer her to keep Hildir's identity a secret in the din.

“So you were tricked, were you?”

Myuri smiled. She was right on the money, despite her sarcasm.

“Well, we saw how the town was, so that is hardly surprising.”

“We?”

She shot Lawrence another look of pure annoyance for butting in before she pointed her chin upward. He looked up to see a bird high overhead.

“Fill me in on the details later. First I will have you tell me what you are doing. With so much pig blood in use, I can only surmise you are having a festival?”

Her sharp mind had clearly realized that this was just a sham.

“How should I put this? We're showing off our natural beauty.”

She smiled at Myuri's reply, knowing what he really meant.

“It is important for everyone to be aware of their responsibilities.”

“Ah, then you take my meaning. I was worried you would be angry at the ridiculousness of it all.”

“I will be, if you perform poorly.”

Myuri pouted, acting surprised.

“But you have not disappointed thus far. The Myuri I knew also loved showing off to others.”

Myuri's surprise was genuine now. He beamed a happy smile and looked at his band's flag before confirming with Holo.

“Really?”

“Yes. It is the male thing to do. Even this one wants to show off!”

She patted Lawrence on the head like some goods being hauled around. He had half a mind to retort, but what could he say when it was the truth?

“Well, there *is* something about war that does that to men, and not just mercenaries. Still, bear with this play; the curtain's only just risen.”

“I have been trying to piece together what you are all doing, but now I see.”

Her calm reply made Moid, the acting commander, turn back in surprise. It seemed this wolf understood everything.

“Okay.”

“Is that why you have left your wagons behind?”

Myuri could only shrug with an expression that made it clear that she was on the money.

“Great, now I do not even have a place to hide.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Hey, you, do not just hold that rabbit!”

She violently snatched the cage with Hildir away from Lawrence. Hildir was always calm, but even he flinched in response.

“All of this 'bloodshed' is because of you, you ridiculous fool!”

She lashed out at Hildir and shook his cage. There was nothing he could do but lie there, literally like a rabbit being eyed by a wolf.

“Take it.”

Having vented, she handed the cage to a young man standing next to them. The youth was perplexed by the whole scene that had unfolded in front of him, but he had seen his captain defer to her. He looked at Myuri, unsure how to react.

“Take good care of that rabbit, now. It's important.”

“Please do. We have other things to do.”

She ignored Myuri's questioning stare and the mortified reaction of the young man. She pulled Lawrence away, who was just as puzzled as they were.

“Where are you going?”

Holo paused at Myuri's question and looked back at him.

“To fetch something hidden in the mountains. It must be retrieved.”

“Then at least let me send some men with you..”

Holo's attitude changed in a flash, and she showed Myuri respect by releasing Lawrence and giving him a serious reply.

“Thank you, but this one will do.”

She then poked Lawrence in the gut. Lawrence understood; he had accepted responsibility for the banned book, even if Holo had just retrieved it. If he wasn't the one that ended up handing it over to Myuri and Hildir, then his promise to her would mean nothing. With no way to protest being treated like a scolded child, he simply let her grab his hand again and lead him away. She looked back as they left.

“Please wait for us, we shall return quite soon.”

“Very well..”

Myuri was obviously still puzzled, and sent them off with his eyes. Holo held Lawrence's hand as she walked in front of him, taking him to a spot that was secluded from the riotous atmosphere of the battle. The men had been there earlier; their footprints and a sled's trail still fresh in the snow, as well as an obvious pair of small feet leading off the road and far into the mountains.

“This is the way you came?”

“Yes. When I heard the sound of battle, I considered turning into a wolf and leaping in.”

Lawrence kept himself from chuckling; he knew he would have wanted her help if things were as bad as they must have sounded. Still, he couldn't suppress a smile when he considered that it was just like her to want to join in the fight.

“Whew, good thing you didn't.. all that work would have been wasted.”

“I would have, if Louis had not been with me.”

“Louis?”

Lawrence couldn't help but ask as he watched Holo pull her cloak up and step onto a ledge.

“Do not give me that look! Him, him!”

When she pointed at the sky, Lawrence finally realized she was talking about the bird.

“How rare for you to call someone by name..”

Holo flashed the same malicious grin she always flashed when she spotted prey.

“Oh? Are you jealous?”

Lawrence felt his heart sink.

“You are, are you not? I doubt you even know how you looked at me when you saw me just now. Like a happy mutt finally seeing his master after a long time!”

She laughed and stepped up on the ledge alone. Lawrence was so bitter he couldn't find any words, so he just followed her with his usual sigh. Damn.. had her time together with that bird led to something?

He kept following Holo, but unlike her light footfalls, his kept sinking into the heavy snow. She laughed at him each time she watched him yank his feet back out. Why was he the only one happy at their reunion?

Again, this was just how he felt back in Pazzio. He was worried sick about Holo, even if she wasn't in any real danger this time. But accidents did happen. They just happened to him. In fact, one false move this time might have been his last. Why didn't she seem to care?

Maybe he shouldn't have hoped for such a reunion. It was selfish, and he knew it. But it was all

he wanted, and all he could think about now. He just kept sinking into the snow as he tried to keep up with her light footsteps.

Finally, he wondered if he ought to just give up and make her look back at him. He even stopped as he mulled it over, but just as he sighed..

“Wh- whooaaaaa!!”

He lost his balance and fell over in a panic. He was falling back down the slope! His life flashed before his eyes, but somehow he miraculously managed to land on his back in just the right pile of snow to survive.

“..whew..”

He was so light-headed he might as well have fainted. Something was on his chest too, probably snow that landed on top of him from the ledge above. His first instinct was to stand up so Holo wouldn't laugh at him, but he was even more nervous when he realized what was really on his chest.

“..Holo?”

She wasn't laughing at him or pulling him up. She just lay there with her face on his chest. It wasn't snow on top of him, but Holo.

“..”

She quietly hugged him. Tightly. She only relaxed long enough to let him breath and shift slightly, then hugged him again. That sound he was hearing must have been her lovely tail sweeping the snow around them.

There was no point in standing up anymore, so he just lay there in the snow. He really did crash down hard. His head was buried so deep that all he could see was snow, and he could barely hear anything. All he heard, in fact, was the muffled sounds of their voices.

The sky was hidden from view; there were only tree branches. It made sense for Holo to hide the book here. It wasn't just Myuri, Moid or Hildir who would struggle to find it, but also Louis, the bird flying in that hidden sky.



He finally wrapped his arms around her and gently rubbed her back. Was she thinner? She reacted to his back rub with a groan of pain, and her small body began trembling. He then also groaned when her claws dug into him.

Thank God.. he wasn't the only one happy about their reunion. It wasn't just him that was missing her. He could finally afford a tiny laugh.

“You're the real actor here.”

He laughed even louder as he repeated her earlier words to Myuri, which only made her dig her claws in even deeper.

“Ow, ow.. but you don't seem as surprised by what's going on as I thought you'd be.”

Holo seemed unsure of what he meant, but after staring off into space for a moment she finally relaxed her grip. He smiled, wondering just how much more like Pazzio this scene could get, but was glad he didn't voice that thought out loud. This way, he could say what he really wanted to say.

“It's good to see you again.”

She finally looked up at him, and her face began to distort. He wasn't nervous this time, and just held her tightly as she began to cry, before quickly moving his legs to prop himself up. She seemed rather upset by it, but he just smiled back even more gently.

“If we take too long, they'll come looking for us.”

She couldn't tolerate hearing her own teases used against her, so Holo pouted and buried her face in his jacket to dry her tears. She then pushed herself away from him and stood up.

“Now I know what a horse must feel like after being ridden.”

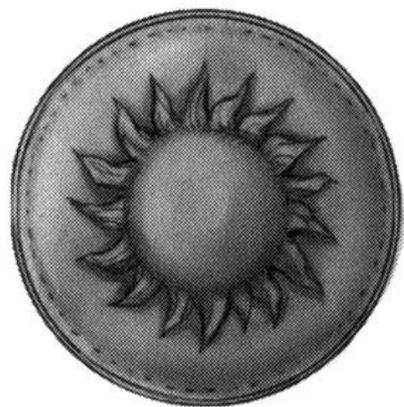
Holo had once nearly crushed him with her giant wolf's paw, but this time she didn't bare her fangs at him. Instead, she leaned down to help him stand up.

“Why would the one holding the reins say that?”

It felt wonderful to hear her say that, but it made him want to snap back, “just who is the one holding the reins here?”

Instead, he stood up silently and dried her remaining tears with his finger. Holo reacted indignantly, but he knew how happy she was by her ears and tail. The moment he had wiped her right eye, she turned her left eye to him. With one last sigh, he completed his duty.

第 六 幕



## Chapter 9

“So this is the banned book?”

Holo had kept the book among the other things she had brought from Kinisen. It was quite an official-looking and authoritative tome, enough to make one think twice about opening the cover.

“What's it say, I wonder?”

“Well, all I know is that the fat merchant said-”

Holo paused as she poked her head through the hole in her shirt.

“That it is the real deal.”

“Oh..?”

Lawrence opened the book and was assaulted by the smell of knowledge in ink-form. There was of course no way he could actually read it, since it had been written in language of those who dwelled in the deserts. The writing was full of odd curves and dots, to the point where Lawrence almost doubted that they were words at all.

“Well, you have it now.”

Holo suddenly stopped moving, and looked at him resentfully.

“..did something happen?”

It was a pricey tome, so odds were good that Holo had to argue with Lou to get it. That's all Lawrence meant, but the way she angrily turned her head caught him off guard.

“Of course!”

“Really?”

He was worried now, but that only annoyed her more.

“Have you any idea how difficult it was for me to leave Cole behind?”

“Oh!”

So that was it.

“But I had to, even if he naturally shed tears when he saw me again. That stupid Church girl should have stayed out of it, but she could not leave things well enough alone.”

It made sense that Holo would only be there for the book if they were in trouble, so Cole would instinctively want to help Holo. If Elsa hadn't stopped her, Holo would have probably taken him back with her.

“Uh.. I see..”

Being uninvolved, there wasn't anything Lawrence could do but sympathize. Holo realized that and finally turned away.

“Curses! I knew better, but that arrogant little brat-”

Holo seemed ready to explode again as she recalled what had happened. Elsa was quite bold, and had clearly done something to offend Holo. Holo's tail was swishing back and forth so furiously that her clothes were flapping around every which-way.

“Argh.. enough of that. Why are you fools taking that rabbit to such a dangerous town?”

She looked up at him, firing yet another question that he didn't want to answer. She even grabbed her belt off of Lawrence's shoulder and brusquely wrapped it around herself, so he wouldn't have a chance to do it himself. People might get the wrong idea if they saw her doing that, but there was no helping the nature of the Wisewolf.

“I already know that you are taking that rabbit to Sovereign after getting swept up in this rebellion, so tell me why you, one who is important to me, must be put in danger?”

There wasn't really that much personal danger in giving Hildir the banned book, but taking him to Sovereign was another matter entirely.

“Well.. let's just say that he made a very compelling case.”

He then went on to recap everything that had taken place after she left for Kinisen, but the look of disinterest on her face couldn't be more obvious. The moment he finished talking, she spoke up.

“Yes yes, I already know that he is clever. The question is: why did the fool before me agree to do this?”

In other words, why would Lawrence accept Hildir's scheme when it clearly made no sense for him to take such a risk? All Lawrence could say in reply to that was to ask her another question.

“You mean I should run away from our problems?”

If he ran, he would have spared himself all of this trouble of going to Sovereign and being involved in a battle. And yet, it wasn't certain that he would have been better off doing so.

“..I am just venting.”

Her reply was weak enough to make it clear that she wouldn't have been happy to see him betray Hildir like that, let alone Myuri.

“But flowers will not bloom without the appropriate seeds.”

True, they had fled before they were adequately prepared. Lawrence shut the book in his hands and nodded before putting it back into Holo's pouch and tying it. It was hardly a typical pouch; it was so tough it felt like it was woven from chains, and even held the coins Hildir meant to pay Lou with.

Lou might be a superb book dealer, but he wasn't a fool. If their plan failed and the book became worthless to them, Holo would surely return it to him, but if their plan succeeded then Lou would have directly helped Hildir. It was worth far more to deny the three hundred coin payment now to earn more in the future. At least, that was how Lou would probably see it.

“You see it now, don't you? Diva's executives suddenly made up their minds to help the barons make a power grab, even though the barons were really the ones pulling the strings. They've committed to some really stupid decisions.”

Holo stared at Lawrence while he spoke, then replied.

“..so they should reap what they have sown.”

“I agree, but this is our best chance to stop them.”

Holo wasn't happy to hear that.

“Oh really? By organizing this little rebellion?”

“Yeah. Diva treated the barons like idiots in order to gain power, and quite a few of them knew how that would end-”

“So the moment they see a chance to retake their company, they will also take action?”

Holo's lips twisted like she was biting into the cheapest rye bread. It really must be that distasteful for her to hear Lawrence make such an assumption, but it wasn't Lawrence's plan to begin with. It was Hildir's, and he was an insider who wouldn't make such assumptions.

“That's Hildir's idea, not mine. It's not likely to be too optimistic, since everyone fights these battles their own way. It's almost guaranteed that some of them will try fighting from the

inside, thinking it's their best shot at saving their company from these idiots.”

“..”

Holo knew it would be true, but she wouldn't just agree until Lawrence asked her what she wanted to do. And yet, she cut him off before he could do so.

“And you believe those who lead the company are among them?”

Such people would normally fight back, but merchants were far too greedy, and the more power they had the greedier they were. Lawrence had even heard of merchants who would kneel and pretend to switch allegiances when the tables turned. Especially when they stood to lose everything.

Besides, Mr. Diva himself could hardly be killed. Without him and Hildir, the company would probably never return to its original glory when the dust settled.

“Yes, I do. Otherwise this plan wouldn't exist.”

Holo stared at Lawrence, mystified. Ultimately she sighed, looking at the forest behind them. Perhaps seeing trees calmed her down.

“Merchants are a horrible lot.”

Evidently, she had come to accept the situation. In a way the situation was actually in her favor; she would never have left Myuri and his men behind, or indeed even Hildir. After all, she had gone to fetch the book precisely because it could possibly avert disaster for her homeland.

That wasn't even considering the fact that Myuri and his men probably wouldn't be in this mess if Lawrence and Holo weren't there to get them caught up in it. She couldn't help but want to make sure this story had a happy ending, and with this planned rebellion it was still possible.

She knew that she had to accept the situation even if she didn't want to. She wouldn't have even thought of running away in the first place, she just needed an excuse to accept everything. Lawrence finally had a chance to ask the question he knew would apply that pressure on her.

“What would you do, if you were one of those horrible merchants?”

“Hmm?”

She gazed at him, unsure how to reply. That adorable expression on her face always instinctively made him want to tease her.

“What's this? Are you trying to lull me into a false sense of security again with your cute little reactions?”

“Are you acting proudly so that I will remind you how I feel about proud males?”

With that she leaned on him with no trace of deviousness.

“Is this what you want?”

She grabbed his arm.

“Ah, yes.. just like that.”

He smiled as he looked back at her.

“Hmph.”

She turned away, and they walked back down to the road just like that. The fight was taking place to their right, and Sovereign lay in the opposite direction. The wagon-sleds had been sent ahead, along with the non-combatants.

“By the way..”

As they turned to the right, Lawrence asked a question.

“What did you do while you were in Lesco two days ago?”

Hildir had told his flying friend Louis that he would go to Sovereign in a pinch, so why had it taken that bird so long to find them? Holo simply shrugged.

“That town was snapped up as tightly as a clam. I judged that the rabbit must be in trouble, but I had no way to know what was happening. He had not so much as left me a note, after all.”

Lawrence could say nothing to that, unless he wanted to risk her wrath.

“Ah, then you were investigating things?”

“Well, all of Louis's friends were hidden, so he had to assume human form. He was so brave to search around like that.. what a pity that he is a bird.”

Lawrence was already surprised enough that she referred to Louis by name, but it was doubly rare for her to openly appreciate someone like that. He couldn't say anything without her calling him out on his jealousy, so he had to play along. And yet, the moment he realized what he was doing, it was too late. She was already smiling.

“..so he's that impressive, huh?”

Lawrence might as well preempt her.

“Quite. Like a heroic adventurer.”

“Oh?”

“He returned after flying non stop for days, only to have to search for his hidden friends. That is hardly an easy task for one man, especially without someone to encourage and guide them. And so, I..”

She paused for a while.

“..I find him impressive.”

She turned her face away from Lawrence, though he knew she wore a puzzled smile. Women found such men hard to resist, after all. So many dramatic stories were about that very premise. If that was true, then.. if a man and a wolf could work, then why not a wolf and a bird?

Lawrence wasn't foolish enough to believe that Holo's heart had swayed, since she would have already made that clear by now. But he still had a tough time maintaining his composure, especially when she smiled at his struggle.

“Y-you, you..”

She was hugging him tightly before he could even find a response. She took a deep breath, smelling his clothes, and by the time she exhaled and released him she was so happy there were tears in her eyes.

“Are you still afraid that I might not love you? Fool.”

He did know. He really did. After all, she only went out of her way to tease him like this when no one else was around. She just wanted to see him say nothing and scratch his head, like he was doing right now.

“But you know, Louis did exactly the same thing; he ran from that disaster area.”

Lawrence felt the stinging itch in his head disappear.

“Really?”

“Well, setting aside your decisions, they are powerful foes. They may become even stronger after this battle. But it is still true: in the end, Louis' courage was how we got this pouch.”

“No matter what, do not let anyone else have this pouch. It must be given to the rabbit - that was what Louis' master told us.”

Based on Holo's serious expression she wasn't joking in the slightest. Lawrence's eyes fell back on the pouch slung over his shoulder.

“Still, with all those enemies in town it was a difficult burden to bear, so the one who gave it to us was brave as well. Surely that is a good enough reason?”

She was obviously poking fun at him, but if that was why she was held up in Lesco then it made sense she would remember and appreciate the names of those involved. But what was in the bag? The 'one' who gave it to her was obviously Mr. Diva himself, so it stood to reason that it contained cash, letters, or maybe even the seal of authority of Diva company.

Those were very important secrets. A company's reputation came down to its credit; once that was gone, it was over. The owner might even wind up dead, or alive but completely shamed.

“Then you already took a peek inside?”

Holo's face became grim, and it then went flying off outside his field of vision. As he fell, he realized it was because she had tripped him.

“Fool.”

He looked up at her and shook his head at her over-reaction to his joke.

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The battle was still raging when they returned. There were four men in Myuri's tent, each with bruises on their face and hands colored a dark purple. It wasn't make-up, but the men had a relaxed look that made it clear how little they feared for their lives. They looked more like people who had just run a race.

“We're back.”

Lawrence announced their presence to Myuri, who gave them a silent nod and looked over at Moid.

“It's almost over.”

In turn, Lawrence nodded at them and took Holo's hand to hide. They had a complete view of this "battle" from their vantage point. Despite the heavy snow and strong wind, everyone was working hard. It turned out that using dull weapons only improved their act, since they could knock a man out without killing him. The worst of it was a few broken bones and people passing out, so far.

Things were going according to plan, with Myuri slowly losing the one-sided battle but not

giving up for a second. They were selling the fact that they knew they were all doomed if they didn't fight extra hard to survive. Their dedication made the farce seem like it was real, and revealed just how much they loved the thrill of warfare.

It didn't matter how stupid their goal was, or that they were just fighting selfishly for their own desires, Lawrence couldn't help but be inspired by them. He wished he could be there with them, even if he'd never handled a sword or spear in his life.

“You admire them.”

Holo was so blunt that Lawrence touched his face to check if he'd been smiling.

“I fail to see what is so great about this?”

She shrugged after uttering that surprising statement, but Lawrence had no way to give her a proper answer. The mercenaries themselves probably couldn't either; there was just something about the momentary thrill of such a fight that only seemed to strike the male heart.

“If being a mercenary was my calling, I doubt I'd ever have met you.”

Holo smiled at him like an older sister.

“Knowing you, you would be just as miserable as a mercenary. You would probably be dead long before you got the chance to meet me.”

Her bluntness was disarming, but also quite accurate.. though it didn't stop Lawrence's mind from wandering. He could have lived a life of violence, becoming a powerful hero who could wield sword and spear. Had he met Holo, they would have run together to Yoitsu, and woe to whomever came between them and their goal.

She would be the same person, but rather than a merchant she would have a mercenary at her side. Someone who would fearlessly look up at her true form, and be worthy of sitting upon her with a spear in hand. She could run with her fangs bared, and he could smite their enemies from her back. Between him and the legendary wolf, who wouldn't run away in terror?

“And yet..”

Holo seemed to realize how embarrassed he would be if she called him out on what he was imagining right now. She squinted and stared at the battlefield.

“I am happy to have you with me regardless of your occupation.”

As she turned, he realized that he couldn't stand up to that smile on her face. Even if he had been a mercenary who could kill with reckless abandon, she would make him lose that edge just as easily with her behavior. It was all just idle speculation, but it made him feel pathetic to

realize that nonetheless. Holo, however, smiled even more happily and returned her gaze to the fight, a trail of white air leaving her mouth.

“I believe there is such a thing as destiny.”

Her words snapped him out of it, making him remember how lucky he was to have even met her. He'd pushed quite hard ever since they met, so if there was such a thing as destiny then the mercenary version of himself would have probably pushed so hard he would have been killed for her sake.

“I tire of the sighs and confusion, and of having to run until I am so sore that all I feel is my hunger. It is something I never believed I would do as a Wisewolf. I had never imagined it until now. And so, I must call it destiny, to ease my mind.”

She was far beyond him and she knew it, even if she felt like leaning on him. He knew that he couldn't catch up to her, no matter how much she slowed down for him, no matter if she was just a few steps away from him now and turning back to face him.

“That is why I thought about other things as I ran.”

“..Such as?”

It was such a strange thing for Holo to say that he was bewildered.

“What we ought to name your shop.”

“What?!”

He was so delighted that he dashed forward to hug her, but froze when he heard an enormous sound behind them. He couldn't believe that he was hearing the sound of trees snapping, but what else could it be?

“Avalanche!!”

Lawrence instinctively turned to spot who it was that shouted that, and noticed that the fighting had stopped. Everyone was staring at the same location, like they had spotted a bear. They couldn't survive something like this, no matter how strong they were. A natural disaster was just that powerful, even if it was snow slowly sliding down through a forest like an enormous wave. The mountain had collapsed, and the valley was being flooded.

“Retreat!!!”

Myuri bellowed, and Reginald did the same, but they didn't have to. Their men were already rushing from the onslaught like ants from a rainstorm. The snow was overwhelming, and covered everything in the valley like a solid cloud of smoke. It was over just as suddenly as it

began, but it had changed everything. The battle was over.

“Grab our wounded and fall back! God is on our side!”

Myuri rushed forward and quickly barked his orders as if to spite Reginald, the captain of Diva's forces. They pulled their comrades from under the snow and scurried up the slope, as Holo and Lawrence marvelled at their luck. Reginald, however, was not impressed.

“Are you running, you cowards!?”

He angrily hurled an arrow at them, and although it flew an amazing distance and struck the area where Myuri's men were gathered, it hit no one. Reginald roared at the emptying valley, and for a moment his anger felt genuine.

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When Lawrence and Holo made it to their camp, they were greeted with warm soup. Even knowing it was a charade, Lawrence was stunned by the turn of events. He was quite eager to make sure everyone was alright after the avalanche, to the point where his expression made it obvious. After their reports, however, it turned out that things were still going according to plan. Fifteen of their men were present, and Moid was talking to Myuri.

“Our lancers were caught by the snow, but they'll be fine.”

“Besides, it wasn't a proper avalanche, just smoke and mirrors. Not like we wanted anyone to die.”

He smiled a crafty smile.

“Just hang on, we'll be contacted soon. We still have to finish what we started.”

Lawrence nodded at Moid's instructions. It made sense in hindsight; even if they fled to Sovereign they'd still have to deal with Diva sooner or later. Myuri surveyed their injured and confirmed their captives, then congratulated the men who had created the ‘avalanche.’ A mercenary captain wasn't able to get away with being haughty, and had to show his men the proper respect.

“Well done, everyone!”

He spoke again when everyone settled down.

“We can still say that we've never lost to the renowned Hugo mercenaries! Sadly we haven't won, either, but we'll get another chance someday!”

Hildir smiled, pleased with his employees.

“I'd love to say 'let's all get some rest' but we're still not finished yet! It's our job to run after the avalanche, so run we shall! What say you?”

He swept his eyes across the tent, but only got back the looks of approval everyone expected. They were all smiling at how fun this was.

“Then let's pack up and get a move on!”

Their role was to run as fast as they could to Sovereign, but they were still calmly sharing anecdotes about the fight they'd just waged. Hugo would be out looking for them already, expecting to find only fifteen 'survivors.' In this sham, the Hugo Mercenaries had to have an absolute advantage to fool the idiots running Diva.

“What will their next move be?”

Holo questioned Lawrence as they packed. She watched him hang their goods on his horse, but remained silent on the topic of the wagon. She was too tactful to darken the mood.

“What do you think? I was surprised when they told me.”

She thought it over, but shrugged.

“I have no idea.”

“A hostage negotiation. Fifteen of us are captured, and we're not in a good position. They won't be expecting us to try to negotiate, so it'll get the Diva representative worked up for sure.”

“..and then we free our friends and flee?”

“That way Hugo can blame it all on the representative, since they did everything he asked.”

Holo hummed in obvious boredom.

“More acting.”

“Still impressive though, huh?”

“Is that all it takes to impress you?”

Lawrence wasn't angered by her jab because he'd be disappointed too if he was in her place.

“Well, impressive enough that you had to ask about it.”

“I suppose it is more impressive than the useless guy in front of me right now.”

Lawrence wasn't about to really argue, so he let Holo win this round with a satisfied sigh.

“Too true. It's a good thing there aren't more people like me to screw things up.”

“Hmm?”

She leaned into him and murmured.

“Is that what has you down?”

There was a look of scorn in her eyes.

“The rabbit is the star this time. In fact, they are guarding him so closely that I cannot even give him *that*.”

With her chin, she pointed at the pouch Lawrence had slung over the horse. They were already hauling enough secrets; three hundred Lumione, and a book the Church wanted to burn. Now they also had a pouch that the head of the Diva company wanted to give to Hildir. In fact, if Hildir knew what was in the pouch, he would laugh. It was such a twist that Lawrence was proud his horse was the one carrying that destiny.

“Yeah.. when we give him that, the last of the responsibility will be off our shoulders.”

“But it will be a while before we can do so. Until then it must not be found.”

“Definitely. What's it look like? I still haven't taken a look..”

Holo glared at Lawrence for bringing it up again. She wasn't proud of her curiosity.

“It is about this large and is wrapped in cloth.”

She used her hands to estimate its size for him, making it clear that it was a rod-like device. Lawrence had assumed that Hildir was being given a dagger, since those were so often exchanged in important deals. But what Holo had brought over her shoulders was the very future of the Diva company.

“It is quite heavy.”

“Yeah, too heavy for a rabbit.”

That was the crux of the problem. It was a bit of a downer to end the topic on that note, however, so Lawrence continued.

“Well, we'll likely get a chance when we get to Sovereign. After all, Hildir has to turn into a

human to deal on Diva's behalf.”

Holo nodded slowly, and opened her mouth only to immediately close it. Lawrence quickly realized it was because Moid was walking up to them.

“Mind joining me?”

“Sure.”

“It's time to discuss the future.”

Lawrence and Holo looked at each other, nodded, and replied in unison.

“Alright.”

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“Who're they?”

Walking to the head of the procession made Lawrence and Holo suffer many a questioning stare, and the attendant carrying Hildir's cage up to them couldn't help but ask that question.

“They're with us.”

Myuri turned back as Moid answered the question. Lawrence was sure Holo hated the situation, but he took back Hildir's cage regardless.

“Ah, another part of the script, then.”

“Welcome back, Ms. Holo. I hear you've brought a book with you.”

Holo accepted being called “Ms.” and nodded.

“Please tell me the details.”

Lawrence spoke up.

“It's a book on mining.”

“I hear it's banned.”

“Indeed. Mr. Hildir could probably fill you in on that better than I could.”

Hildir finally opened his eyes.

“All our investigations turned up was that its author was put to death, taking any such details with him to the grave.”

“For real?”

Myuri seemed taken aback.

“It's authenticity was confirmed by a book dealer, but it's written in a desert language that we don't understand.”

“I see. But as a member of Diva company, you still have faith in it's worth?”

That was a difficult question to answer, but Hildir did so immediately.

“We've placed our bets on this book's reputation.”

Lawrence's ears picked up the sound of Holo's tail bristling.

“Hmm, alright. It's just a crucial element to our negotiations, so we're counting on it.”

“Finding a translator is never easy, so there's no way to be strictly sure if it's everything it's cracked up to be. That's just the way these things go.”

He sure wasn't softening any blows. Even Moid, who had fallen behind a bit, visibly flinched.

“But all the key pieces are in place now: your mercenaries, the book, and just in case, Ms. Holo.”

Those were the prerequisites for Hildir's plan. As always, victory came down to how well one used the people around them, and there was no questioning Myuri and Hildir's abilities in that department. Holo, however, was upset to be treated as a “piece.”

“Well, there's good news from ahead of us, at least: Sovereign's municipal council welcomes us.”

That meant they wouldn't have to fight their way into town.

“That doesn't really mean we're safe, though.”

The moment they realized that Myuri's band was pursued, they seemed worried. However, there was nothing anyone could do about that.

“Of course not. After all, the enemy of my enemy isn't always my friend.”

It was likely that Sovereign was just like any other group of people who had organized into a

town despite having their own agendas. This was a good time to be prudent and play it safe.

“At any rate, we do share one common goal. It's just that we have to figure out how to deal with people who are resisting for the sake of resistance, rather than for the sake of survival.”

Myuri looked over at Hildir.

“In other words, you are saying that I cannot hide forever?”

“Precisely. It's not like we can do your job, Hildir Schunard. My people don't take kindly to being ordered around, which is why you merchants will have to do the talking when we get to Sovereign.”

Hildir undoubtedly aimed to expand Diva company once he retook the reins. Not everyone in Sovereign would agree with that policy, and in fact they were probably going to withhold their help unless they came to an agreement. However, Hildir poked his head through the bars of his cage and spoke fearlessly, in spite of having more bandages than fur right now.

“Even the Bible warns that one cannot hide forever. I have no intent to do so.”

“Oh, so you're saying that you'll reach an agreement with all of those disagreeing parties?”

Myuri shot him a menacing stare. He had to trust Hildir, having sided with him, but it was time for Hildir to confirm that he would honor his end of the deal. They were nothing but a bunch of rebels to Diva, so it was necessary to spell everything out. Hildir was unfazed.

“That's my job. Hopefully you'll let me do it.”

He wasn't being impetuous, and it was not a request. After a staring contest, it was Myuri who looked away. He stepped back, put his hand on his chest, and bowed before pledging his loyalty.

“Then we shall be your sword and shield, and your body will be the flag on our banner of blood.”

“And may that flag be the one left soaring in the end.”

Myuri was taken in by Hildir, who seemed to know exactly what to say to get his way. His words could even sway these hearts. It was a dangerous skill to use.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be a merchant just like you.”

Hildir could even coax that kind of admission from Myuri, despite barely moving in Lawrence's hands.

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It was midnight when a scout from Hugo finally caught up with them. It wasn't the same messenger who had approached them secretly, but a proper ambassador. He was treated respectfully by Myuri's men.

“Good.”

That was all Myuri said in response to the man. He was behaving as seriously as someone under the watchful eyes of appraising merchants. Miracles could happen in the dark, even the survival of the Myuri mercenary band.

“We shall meet at the promised place.”

The man left almost as soon as they had greeting one another, leaving behind only silence. Everything had been set up beforehand, but it was still quite a tense situation.

“Moid! Time to go!”

“Yes sir!”

Myuri barked at Moid, who spoke to the man standing guard next to him, watching their sleds full of equipment. The man carefully pulled a fur coat out for Myuri; it was the kind of coat that commanded respect, even if wasn't particularly warm and weighed too much to be comfortable. Myuri put that coat on and drew his sword.

“I can never tell if it's this thing that's too heavy or if it's my conscience.”

For him to crack such a dumb joke now showed just how nervous he was.

“All set, Mr. Lawrence?”

Their conversation earlier had been to inform Lawrence that he needed to join the negotiations. Hildir was too injured to join, and revealing that during a negotiation was at best unwise. Besides, everything was scripted out, so he was little more than a glorified spectator. He'd done his best to reassure Holo, but in the end it was obvious that he was really reassuring himself. He only received a jab to the side from her.

“We have to be ready to run at any moment, in case things turn sour.”

Moid's face became grim as Myuri mentioned that, but all the other men just smiled back. Lawrence felt like he should say something to Holo to improve her mood, but she was yawning and drinking without so much as peeping at him. She wasn't even trying to hide her displeasure at how nervous he was.

Lawrence, Moid and two other guards then followed Myuri out into the darkness. The moon was dim, and the clouds didn't help things. It was freezing, and it felt like it would snow at any second. By the time they made it to their designated meeting place in the valley, Hugo was already there.

Hugo had dressed like they won the battle, but even Moid and Myuri were surprised by their choice of dress. Lawrence, too, wondered why Reginald was wearing a normal coat. It was clearly expensive, but Myuri's coat was far more impressive. Lawrence assumed it was to aid in their negotiations somehow, and Myuri and Moid seemed to come to the same conclusion.

“Let's go.”

Myuri was the first to head down the slope, with Lawrence clumsily trailing him. The Hugo captain and the young representative from Diva stood side by side with two guards directly behind them. Moid was keeping an eye out for traps, but having seen nothing he winked to Myuri. They then stopped.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

He hopped off his horse and greeted the men.

“You did get my message, didn't you?”

Reginald jumped right into antagonism.

“Well, just in case you didn't: this is not a negotiation. It is an ultimatum.”

Reginald's coat was simply worn for warmth, unlike Myuri's showy coat. With Reginald's declaration, there could be no mistaking this as anything but an ultimatum.

“Fine by me. I've no mind for negotiations, only swinging swords.”

Myuri's reply made the Diva representative frown. Reginald put on an even less pleasant expression than Moid and continued.

“We've captured fifteen of you, and you've captured only four of us. There's nothing more to say. However, you have an honorable reputation, so we've decided to spare you.”

Reginald wasn't just talking big, because if they really had fought to this kind of conclusion they would have destroyed Myuri's mercenaries. These would be the same words he would have chosen in that case.

“We'll let you go if you submit to our terms.”

Reginald spoke as if he wanted nothing to do with Myuri, which suited the dark and cold

atmosphere of the valley perfectly. The merchant standing next to him finally smiled.

“I am Roger Graham from Diva company.”

He was staring Myuri down, like he expected people to bow at the mere mention of the Diva company. But Myuri had no fear of them, nor Graham. He didn't look back at all. Graham's response was one of pure rage. He knew better, though, and took a few deep breaths of freezing air to calm himself. He then revealed a piece of parchment with their terms written on it.

“Two conditions. One, pay for the hostages. Two, halt your advance.”

Everything was going exactly as they expected it would, except perhaps for Graham's immensely bloated sense of self-importance.

“What is your reply?”

He was trying to corner them. Reginald looked at him, but made no move to stop him. Myuri shot back with a dismissive gesture.

“Pay for hostages? It's like you're selling slaves or something.”

Graham's face turned red in rage at his provocation. Lawrence was surprised to see a fellow merchant with such a short fuse. Perhaps he'd landed his position before he'd grown into it, much like anyone who'd been too lucky. Graham glared at Myuri.

“Ten Lumione for each hostage! Now!”

That amounted to five thousand Trenni silver coins. Lawrence didn't know what hostages went for, but this was quite obviously ludicrous.

“H-hey now..”

Reginald tried to nervously calm Graham down.

“You heard me! It's already too much that we're letting these losers go!”

Reginald had made it clear this wasn't a negotiation, but Graham's demands were well beyond reason for an ultimatum. Myuri glared back at him just as coldly.

“Is this how low the great captain Reginald has fallen?”

Reginald could say nothing. Graham didn't care at all, and just raised a piece of parchment in the air.

“Big talk, loser! This is no negotiation, see?!”

Myuri shot Graham a look of pure hatred, breathing quickly and angrily. In that state, no one could negotiate effectively. Myuri was shocked by what Graham was holding up.

“What?!”

“..Ha! Hahahahaha! See?! Losers! It says so right here, in this contract! Those men you so willingly left behind were the ones who suggested this amount after we saved them! Their fingerprints are right here! Get it now?! You have to pay, or you'll be breaching this contract! So go ahead and breach it, cowards! We'll just hunt you down!”

Lawrence was unable to see the contract from where he stood, but if there really were fingerprints there then it was true: it was a contract, and had to be fulfilled.

“W-what have you done..”

Graham was so pleased with himself that he wore it plainly on his face.

“Read for yourself! It's a proper contract all right!”

Lawrence felt nothing but pity for Graham, who was clearly too used to solving his problems with tactics that only worked on companies. He didn't even know the most basic rule of contracts: they were not magic spells capable of restraining people.

“Wait.. wait..”

“What? I can't believe it! Are you illiterate?!”

A split-second later, Graham was confused by what was happening.

“God you're annoying.”

“Myuri!!”

Reginald screamed out and pointed his sword at Myuri, but he was too late. Myuri had grabbed Graham and flung him over to Moid. The tables had turned. This might seem like a business deal, but it was really a battleground.

“Oh.. uh..”

Moid held Graham by this thin neck, as the man kicked for his life.

“Don't move, or I'll snap his pathetic neck.”

Myuri glared at Reginald as he delivered his own ultimatum. Graham finally stopped thrashing around.

“Hey, Myuri..”

“Oh please, Uncle Reginald! Don't look at me like that, you're the ones working for this filth!”

Reginald looked over at Graham with an even grimmer expression, then breathed in deeply.

“Unhand Mr. Graham.”

“Mister?! Your flag is weeping! How could you be a dog for such a master?”

Myuri turned back, and Graham began kicking again. The gravity of the situation seemed to have sunk in for him.

“Oh? Now who's the loser?”

Myuri's fist struck Graham's stomach a moment after that. Lawrence heard bones breaking.

“Oy, Myuri!!”

Reginald bellowed.

“Okay, okay.”

Myuri raised his arms in a gesture of surrender and turned back to Reginald, who seemed stunned by the turn of events.

“Bring my people here, now!”

“Mmph..”

Graham tried talking, but Moid's hand was covering his mouth. It was possible he was actually crying.

“You're the one who didn't want a negotiation, right?”

Myuri's voice was ice cold. He knew this was an act, but deep down he couldn't forgive what Graham had done. Reginald looked back over at Graham, then Myuri, then spoke.

“..Please unhand Mr. Graham.”

“Only if he stops dishonoring my band.”

Graham was really struggling to talk now. Reginald walked by Myuri and took a look at him. Myuri sighed and spun around.

“Jeez, you're going soft, Uncle Reginald.”

“Don't be stupid! He's from Diva company..”

“Well, at least you're proving to be an honorable and loyal mercenary. If Mr. Graham shows even half of that honor, maybe we could come to a bargain!”

Myuri smiled and Reginald nodded. What a show they were putting on. Myuri nodded to Moid, who released Graham. Graham collapsed and coughed. Myuri looked down on him like a bug he'd stomped on with his shoe, like he had already forgotten having crushed him. Graham finally looked up and called out a name.

“..Reginald..”

His words would probably be “save me.”

“Now!”

An instant later, Lawrence saw Myuri take to the skies. At least, that's what it looked like at first, until Lawrence saw Reginald's fist hovering in the air where Myuri was a moment ago.

“..I thought better of you, Myuri..”

Reginald shot his guards a look, and when they had placed their swords against Myuri's throat he turned like a great bear.

“Who's going soft now?”

“..Mr. Reginald..”

“Yes?”

Reginald casually responded to Moid. Was this part of the act, or had Myuri gone too far? No.. this was clearly betrayal, wasn't it? By the time Lawrence had realized what was happening, he saw Reginald flick his wrist and felt something pass through his left leg. Suddenly, he was kneeling.

“Oh, he really is just a merchant.”

Reginald sounded disappointed. Lawrence must have been slashed by a sword. Moid had moved to grab Graham again, but was too late.

“Jeez, what a disappointment..”

Moid looked over at Myuri, who wasn't dead or passed out. Swords were on his throat, so he couldn't move, but he was still wobbly from having been dealt such a savage blow to the head. He might not even be entirely conscious. He was a sitting duck.

“Come here, Mr. Graham.”

Graham crawled over to Reginald as Moid watched. Lawrence couldn't do a thing.

“Poor you, I didn't think he'd go that far.”

Reginald lifted Graham up with his powerful arms.

“Ugh.. ah..”

“Ah, just a broken rib or two. You'll be fine, you didn't even cough up blood. Myuri got it worse than you.”

Myuri tried to sit up at the mention of his name, but fell but down and groaned.

“Reginald..”

“Oh, you're still conscious? Guess I should have punched you harder.”

Reginald handed Graham to his guard, then strode over to Myuri and looked down on him.

“But hey, this'll save time. Listen up, Myuri. You lose. There's no going to Sovereign now. I know you've got Hildir Schunard. Tell me where he is, and no tricks! If you do, I'll let you guys go.”

Myuri just stared off into space like he couldn't hear anything. Reginald sighed and knelt down in front of him.

“I know you can hear me. You're moving around too much, you know.”

He planted his boot on Myuri's right knee.

“Hey!”

Reginald's entire body pressed down until Myuri's knee was broken.

“ARGH!!”

“Oh, you're awake now? Then answer me!”

He knelt down again. Myuri knew he'd been betrayed, and that they were caught in a nasty trap.

“..Why..”

“Why? You're answering with a question?”

Reginald drew Myuri's sword. It seemed valuable, but he let it dangle like it was worthless. It could be beautiful, and that didn't matter. All that mattered was it's edge. Even the dullest blade could be a powerful weapon. He forced it between Myuri's fingers.

“Then this is my answer.”

He dropped Myuri's sword and wiped his hand, like it was filthy.

“It's all about money.”

He kicked Myuri's knee, then the sword.

“H-how do you..!”

“Haha! It sure is pitiful to see someone so damn naive! To think I'm the one who has to teach you about reality!”

Once more he lifted Myuri's sword, this time studying its bloodied edge.

“The brave, determined, and stubborn Hugo Mercenaries. That's the line we've lived by for twenty years, and we've been around for centuries before that.”

Perhaps his head was too woozy to feel the pain, or maybe he was only half-conscious, but Myuri stared right back at Reginald with worried eyes and repeated himself.

“..Why! Answer me!”

“So damn annoying.. Why did I betray you? Because I'm a mercenary! Codes of honor don't fill your belly, damn it!”

Reginald stood back up. Graham had struggled over to Myuri with the help of the other mercenaries, and now spoke.

“The money, Myuri.”

Reginald handed Myuri's sword over to Graham.

“Give me something less pathetic to kill him with.”

Graham was furious. Moid wanted to make a move, but Reginald kept him at bay with his own sword. He'd already proven his strength, and he had the upper hand.

“I won't hesitate to kill you, Moid.”

Graham was busy pushing Myuri's own sword into his right leg.

“Agh!”

“That's enough, we don't want him dying on us just yet.”

Reginald placed his hand on Graham's shoulder, who stared at Myuri with pure loathing before spitting on him.

“I had a long time to think it over, and you only live once. So I might as well work for someone like Diva who's got all the money.”

It was like Reginald was talking to the moon that had hidden behind the clouds. He sighed.

“Think, Myuri.. How many groups have disbanded in these cash-strapped times? And how many of them are still remembered today?”

Myuri closed his eyes. He already had to stomach the pain, and now he also had to listen to Reginald's speech.

“Listen to me!”

Reginald wasn't about to be ignored. He stepped on Myuri's knee again.

“And then Lesco rolls around, and suddenly our days are numbered. Who cares about things like honor anymore?”

Reginald was dominating the situation, but he spoke with sadness. It was clearly genuine, too.

“We all just wanna end up living a good life, right? Well, we can do that just by serving the merchants.”

Lawrence was overcome with disgust. He stared up at Reginald only to see a face look back begging for forgiveness. He'd betrayed his principles for money. He'd taken advantage of his friend's situation and injured him terribly.

It seemed the Diva company just had that effect on people. Maybe this was how all merchants looked to others? After all, they were a group of merchants, and merchants wanted to replace the old systems of power with ones based on money.

The disgust that Lawrence felt only increased when he saw what was happening; he wanted money to solve everything, but not this way. This was beyond filthy. Reginald had sold his soul for money, and he would never be able to wash the blood off of his hands.

“When you look at it that way, gold and wine are far more attractive than dying principles. That’s all this is, Myuri.”

He looked down on Myuri once more.

“You must know where Hildir Schunard is. You’re taking him to Sovereign. So where is he? Everyone’s waiting, Myuri. Tell us.”

“I’ll kill you myself if you don’t speak up.”

Graham cut in to deliver a threat, and after seeing his short temper in action it clearly wasn’t an empty threat. Reginald looked at him, then back at Myuri.

“I see.. so you’d rather die at the hands of a fellow mercenary?”

“Reginald..!”

Moid tried to yell, but his fatigued voice was swallowed by the stark atmosphere. Reginald wasn’t threatening; if anything, some part of him wanted to be merciful to his friend.

“It’s not like we’ve never killed for money, so there’s no need to play pretend here. You’d better speak up, Myuri. Or..?”

All the emotion on Reginald’s face suddenly dropped, and he coldly unsheathed his own sword.

“..Do you really not know?”

Mercenaries would do anything for money. Lawrence had always known this.

“..”

As Myuri’s lips moved, Reginald halted. He looked back at Graham and his men, then knelt down.

“Come on Myuri, out with it!”

He spoke like he was encouraging a dying friend. A man who had just sold his own for money was trying to get his friend to talk, and that mouth was finally moving to do so..

“..Mr. Lawrence..”

Reginald was just as shocked as Lawrence. Why would he be calling him right now? It meant he hadn't given up, let alone broken. He hadn't even issued any final commands to Moid. Instead, this mercenary captain was using his last words to talk to some injured merchant?

“..call her..”

Lawrence would have collapsed on the spot if he had time to let his emotions get the best of him. But if this was the only way to make things right, then at least he could shout out loud to vent his frustrations. Not even the dirtiest merchant could stand up to the ancient powers, which Lawrence was breathing in deeply to summon..

“Holoooooo!!!!!!”

He howled into the sky with a bellow that even made him close his eyes. No, that was a lie. He was really just too scared to keep them open and see what was coming his way. He hit the ground a moment later as Reginald ran up to him with a ridiculous burst of speed and kicked him. He vomited, on the verge of tears, but the pain of the kick was nothing compared to the fact that all he could do was call Holo's name. He was only good for making enough noise to summon her.

“Prepare for battle!”

Reginald shouted, and a large number of archers suddenly popped up on the slope. They were ready.. but nothing was happening.

“..Hmm?”

Reginald frowned in utter disappointment.

“All you had left in you was a prayer, Myuri?”

Just as he moved over to shake Myuri by the shoulders, everyone froze. Even Lawrence, whose back straightened up involuntarily. It was said that a bird that knew it was marked for death would simply sit there until it was shot, like a frog patiently waiting for a snake to swallow it whole. Prey could be overwhelmed if the hunter was too strong, like they were commanded to sit still.

“A fire.. light-”

Reginald faltered, as though he had just then forgotten how to speak. Or perhaps he would have continued, but Lawrence wasn't sure. Reginald's body was too busy sailing through the air, hurled upward by the same giant something that chased him through the air only to step on him before he had come to a rest.

It was Holo. She stood there, not roaring, or making any other sound. The moon had chosen to peek out from behind the clouds of this dark night, revealing the white breaths that were being exhaled between Holo's fangs. This wasn't a town; there were no human lights here to shine on the darkness. This was a dark, quiet mountain pass near a forest, where the beasts and spirits ruled.

Holo slowly shook her head, and Lawrence forgot about everything else. He needed to run to her. Damn this injured leg of his, and this kicked stomach. He would make it to her even if he had to crawl. Or he would have, had one of Myuri's guards not plucked him up by the collar. As Holo moved to the horses, only one of them still retained its wits: Lawrence's horse. With the guard's help, Lawrence was able to get to the horse and grab its rein before shouting to Moid.

“Get him on my horse!”

Moid was already running up to them with Myuri over his shoulder. His face was a mess of tears, probably ones of regret. After setting Myuri on the horse, he realized how hurt Lawrence was and helped him up onto the horse as well.

“Please..!”

Moid turned at the sound of Lawrence's voice, as did the two guards next to them. They had drawn their swords, but their hands were shaking. Lawrence didn't have to think about why; they weren't angry or cowardly, just afraid of Holo.



“Hey!”

Lawrence shouted out, but Moid and the others were too surprised to act; the Hugo mercenaries were dropping like flies, what chance did they have?

“Come on! We can make it!”

Lawrence had to encourage them.

“We have to go!”

It was hopeless. They stood no chance against Holo, and Hugo would kill them. At best, they would be taken prisoner. Moid was shivering, doing his best to control his wrath. But he was an excellent staff sergeant, so Lawrence just had to keep trying.

“Mr. Moid..!”

“..sorry you had to see that. Let's go! We have to get you and the master out of here!”

Lawrence held the reins as well as he could to guide his horse, but his vision was growing hazy from loss of blood. It wasn't just the dark, freezing night slowing him down. They trudged back to camp as Lawrence reconsidered how great the power of merchants was. Money could corrupt even the greatest of minds. It was like he was wandering through a nightmare, one created by solving problems with money.

His dream was broken, and now so was his leg. His body swayed back and forth with the horse's movement, but at least he wasn't as bad off as the corpse-like Myuri lying unconscious behind him. His strength was failing him, but Moid was there to keep him from falling off his horse. Each time he nearly fell, he could see the mercenaries behind them were nervously watching their backs.

Their camp wasn't far, but it might as well be at the ends of the earth for all he could tell. Once more he remembered his time in the Pazzo sewers, fleeing for his life with a gash in his arm. He was still the same pathetic man he was back then. Each time he felt himself losing consciousness, he laughed at himself.

“The camp! We're almost there!”

Once more, Lawrence nearly collapsed. Moid nervously held him up and took the reins from him. Myuri was so cold now that he might as well be a corpse.

“Bring me medicine and wine!”

Moid bellowed as loudly as he could, and the men still at camp came running out to see what was happening. The first didn't even have to ask before he turned back and barked out

additional orders. With each additional order, another soldier came rushing out and played the next role in this well-oiled machine. Lawrence was the odd man out.

Mercenaries fought daily, so such things were as natural to them as breathing. Their response to this emergency was hauntingly beautiful, in fact. It wasn't the kind of thing that could be done in a few days of training; these were people who had fought beside one another for years. Hugo could never find that level of camaraderie again; not when they were throwing it all away for some cash.

“Get all the hot water! Tend to the master!”

They were circled around Lawrence's horse, and had moved him and Myuri off. This time he wasn't being kept at a distance like some shady merchant, but rather treated as the benefactor who had defended Myuri with his own life. He lay on a blanket in the snow, and was being gently slapped. He tried letting them know he was conscious, but his mouth wouldn't move. In fact, his mind was slipping. After a harder slap, his mind finally came into focus enough to notice that a soldier had tended to the wound on his leg, and the pain had somewhat faded.

“Stop his bleeding! Isn't the medicine ready yet?!”

“Staff sergeant! Should we fight or move on?”

“Weapons! Ready your weapons!”

“Run, boy! Get another pouch, double-quick!”

It was noisy, and people were running every which way. Some snow had fallen on his face, but was quickly brushed off for him. Was he still on the battlefield?

“God's on your side, your prayers have been answered.”

He saw a minister with tousled hair and a grim look on his face. With such a simple coat his sword was in plain view, but he really looked the part of a proper mercenary minister.

“They have..?”

Lawrence was too bleary to answer with much force, but the minister smiled and gently smacked his face one last time before standing up.

“Can you hear me?”

Was that Moid? Who's hand was smacking him around like that?

“It's me, Mr. Lawrence! It's me!”

Lawrence nodded, his mind still in a haze.

“That wolf.. is it on our side?”

Moid's eyes were deadly serious, and Lawrence quickly understood what he was asking.

“It's Holo..”

Again, his answer was softer than he intended, but Moid raised his chin abruptly.

“Good!”

The Hugo mercenaries were still after them, so if Moid made one bad move their entire band would be good as dead. That was exactly what his grim eyes had been saying to Lawrence a moment ago.

“Grab anything that can be used as a weapon! Only leave what we need for healing!”

Almost all of the men had a weapon in one hand, be it a spear, axe or sword, and with their free hand they passed around a bottle of wine and a torch.

“The Hugo mercenaries may have betrayed us, but thankfully we still have friends in high places!”

Everyone cheered, but hushed themselves almost immediately.

“Staff sergeant.. over there!”

One of the men was pointed into the dark. Lawrence saw Moid turn in that direction and then he heard something. Was that an army? Was the ground shaking? He finally put two and two together and realized that he was hearing the gentle footsteps of a certain enormous body, and feeling their impact through the ground. They were the same paws that had saved him before, and made him calm enough to feel his exhaustion.

“..Is that you, Ms. Holo?”

Holo didn't respond to Moid's question, but flung something on the ground instead. Several gasps were heard.

“W-Why did you bring Graham..?”

Moid was flummoxed.

“He may prove useful.”

Holo's reply made Lawrence laugh, but no sound came out of his throat. He could see Hildir in his cage, wearing what appeared to be a smile.

“More of your men are coming back, and some of them are wounded. Help them.”

Judging by the stiffness of her voice, Holo was probably sitting down. The mercenaries stared at each other silently before rushing off with a shout. As their footsteps trailed off, he heard enormous footsteps once more.

“Fool.”

She licked his face.

“We.. made it..”

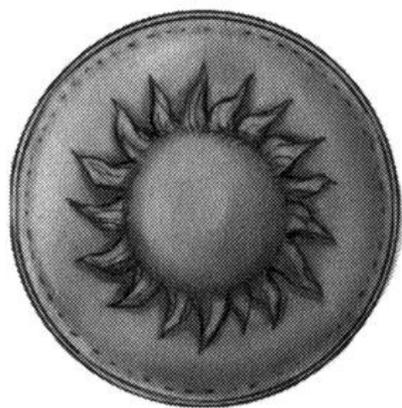
“Barely.”

She looked in the direction that Moid and his men had charged.

“But helping them was probably a mistake.”

With that, she left his side. What did she mean that it was probably a mistake? In his state, Lawrence couldn't settle on an answer. He could only lose consciousness.

第 六 幕



## Chapter 10

When he woke up, Lawrence was in a room with a warm fire. It felt as if he'd awakened from a long dream, but the pain he felt when he moved his leg was enough to force him back to reality. He could vaguely recall arriving in Sovereign before dawn broke. He slowly moved himself off the bed, doing his best to avoid putting weight on his leg.

The light shining in through the shutters was rather weak; it was probably cloudy outside. In fact, it wasn't just quiet indoors, but outdoors as well. Maybe it was still early? That would mean he hadn't slept enough, but he wasn't tired. Just like every time he was put through the wringer like this.. And this time he knew why.

His rage still hadn't subsided. It wasn't just the betrayal of the Hugo mercenaries. He also couldn't forgive the shameful tactics Diva had employed to initiate their betrayal. Reginald was the one who had gone along with it, so he had to take the blame, but it was obvious that he was all but begging Myuri for forgiveness.

Anyone could see that Reginald felt forced into it: he must have been made an offer that he couldn't refuse. While in Lesco, the mercenaries had learned that the world was moving on. They had to move along with it, so of course a leisurely life of guaranteed income would entice him. If merchants were able to provide that, everyone would follow them.

However, Reginald was hardly worthy of pity. He'd destroyed Myuri's leg. He'd stabbed him in the arm and thigh. Myuri didn't even have his wits about him, and Reginald had tried to pressure him to surrender like he was begging, "Please join me, I don't want to be the only one doing this!" He clearly regretted surrendering his principles without more of a fight.

This whole situation made Lawrence sick to his stomach. This wasn't how business should work. It just wasn't!

“..”

He did his best to stand and put on his coat, only to spot a mess of fur under the chair it was draped over. Holo had obviously been watching over him from that very chair.

He stumbled his way out into the corridor, dragging his injured leg. It turned out that it was early, and the air in the corridor was surprisingly fresh. He sensed that he was likely on the third or fourth floor of whatever building he was in, and so he worked his way down to the second floor - that was surely where Myuri and Hildir would be, if they were here at all.

Things were too dire for Lawrence to sleep right now. Hildir hadn't expected that the Hugo mercenaries would attack Myuri's, nor that they would ever side with the Diva company. The

power balance in Diva had to be in worse shape than Hildir expected. After all, Hugo had stabbed their friends in the back to win Diva's favor.

Worst of all was the fact that they nearly succeeded. If Holo hadn't been with them, they would all be corpses now. They made it to Sovereign with her help, but that was hardly comforting when Diva could just attack Sovereign to preempt a revolt. That wouldn't be an easy fight, so Lawrence's mind was weighed down rather heavily as he trudged down to the second floor.

Once there, he spotted a tired-looking child at the end of the corridor. They were nodding off, but when they spotted Lawrence they knocked on the door beside them and popped their head in. A person then emerged from the room: Holo. The moment her eyes fell on Lawrence she angrily stomped over to him.

“What are you doing?”

“Am I just supposed to lie down now?”

She helped him walk forward.

“Where are you going?”

“To you, of course. Weren't you all discussing what our next move is?”

Lawrence wouldn't be left out of such a conversation now; he might just be an injured traveling merchant, but he felt obliged to help Hildir and Myuri. There was no way he could let the Diva company get away with this.

“We were not.”

Her calm reply made him angry. It was just like the answer a mother would give to fool her child.

“It is true! Hey, you! Please calm down!”

The child stood there watching, puzzled by their interaction. Lawrence hadn't fully recovered yet, so he was fading in and out of consciousness. However, his thoughts were as clear as ever. Why was she pinning him against the wall? He had to stand up tall so she would see that he was fine. But just as that thought crossed his mind, he felt her hand upon his forehead. It was so cold he flinched.

“..you are delirious from the fever..”

Fever? How could that be? But then again it did feel like all the strength in his body was gone.

“Your leg was wounded, remember? I thought you would vomit out your lungs. If you push

yourself now, you might die. Would you like it if our roles were reversed right now?"

She just couldn't be defeated. He looked away, still trying to press forward, but couldn't.

"You must accept the reality."

"..What?"

Holo stared back at him.

"That we lost."

"Lost..?"

He couldn't even keep standing under his own power anymore, but he wouldn't back down. Traveling merchants were a stubborn lot.

"There's no way that Hildir gave up already!"

Holo surely realized why she couldn't just ask Lawrence to give up. If Hildir hadn't given up, then why would she be saying they had lost? It didn't make sense. They had to be meeting in that room, in spite of Hildir's injuries, if only to decide what came next. They still had a chance, after all. They were in Sovereign. Hildir's determination wouldn't let him give up until he was killed.

It didn't matter that the Hugo Mercenaries had betrayed them, or that Myuri was almost killed. True, it was a severe blow, but they still had the banned book, gold, and enough mercenaries to enact their plan. It was still possible to salvage the situation by fanning the flames of rebellion against Diva. Lawrence had to do his part if he wanted Diva's original dream to become a reality. He had found his own determination to do so.

"Quite right. He did not give up."

"Then.."

"But we are not going to do what you hope we were."

"..Then what *are* we doing?"

Holo turned her face away at his question. It was rare to see her do that, let alone squint the way she was squinting now. The child suddenly disappeared into the room, presumably having been dragged in by unseen hands. Lawrence turned back to Holo, finally realizing what she didn't want to say. He spoke his next words half to himself.

"Surely.. we aren't going to run?"

Holo finally looked up at him and nodded gravely.

“Yes, we are.”

He couldn't take those beautiful eyes piercing into him like that, so he grabbed her small shoulders.

“No way! There's just no way!”

How could he possibly abandon Hildir and the mercenaries and flee?

“And what can we accomplish if we remain? What can you do?”

Holo's hands covered his own, still cold as ice. Her sad eyes were now staring at his chest.

“This was not just my decision. It was the decision of all the men who have succeeded the wills of Myuri and that rabbit.”

So that was why Holo was in that room. She wasn't convincing them to do something, they were trying to convince her. And the worst part was that it was the only thing he could do. He really couldn't help them now. If anything, he'd only be a burden on them. He swallowed, hoping his saliva would take some of his pride down with it.

“And the others.. they're staying?”

Holo hesitated, but nodded after a while.

“The rabbit has not given up, and Myuri's men cannot move.”

Myuri had been gravely wounded, and he wasn't the only one of his band who had been injured. Worse, if they ran they would only be chased down to the next town. They couldn't avoid a fight. They might as well face their enemies head on then be stabbed in their backs. And even if they weren't thinking in such honorable terms, their situation wouldn't improve if they left anyhow.

“And.. you feel this is a good time to leave?”

Lawrence felt evil to ask that question, but could they really abandon the others? Hildir had his dream, yes, but he was also looking out for the interests of the north. Likewise, Myuri's band was founded centuries ago, and was related to Holo's ancient friend. Could they really let these people become historical footnotes? Besides, if they lost it was clear that the situation was only going to get worse.

“Of course not!! How could it be a good time!?”

Her voice broke as she shouted out loud. Lawrence needed to hear her say so. He was too close to caving in, and knew he would forever be begging her for forgiveness if he did so. He had to make sure he did everything he could.

“Then we have to stay, don't we? It's just like in Winfield. They don't want to stay either, so how can we abandon them? Especially if they're the successors of your old friend from Yoitsu..”

Holo snapped, and had to turn away before she burst into tears. They weren't tears of sadness, but anger.

“And what will you do? Stay here until the last second when you have to run? I am not a god! Even I will die if we are overwhelmed! Will it be any easier to run away all alone, when you have just watched all of your friends die? No? Of course I do not want to run, but there is hardly any profit in death! It is obvious that we have no choice!”

Her entire speech came out in a single breath, and made so much sense that she'd clearly considered things carefully. She really had. After all, Lawrence was just a wounded traveling merchant.. what hope did he have against a company with an army?

“You do realize that there is nothing you can do, yes?”

He wasn't able to fight on account of his leg. He could only rest in the inn and eat the town's food, which would be ever more scarce if they were waging war. He couldn't even bargain for them. All he could do was make an appearance if they happened to win. He was beyond useless to them now, and would only share the same end they did if they lost.

One as powerful as a king might simply be exiled, and only killed if they tried to fight back, like Hildir. He would meet that end now if Diva won, as the would-be organizer of a rebellion. Diva was probably going to start their expedition here, killing off all resistance as they marched. Not many would be willing to fight against such odds, because no one wanted to die.

Lawrence really had no better options available to him right now, and Holo's stare only served to emphasize that.

“You want to open your own shop, do you not? You even asked me to name it. You wanted to live happily together with me. H-have you forgotten that promise?”

Lawrence stared back at her, knowing that he deserved to hear her shoot back with such a dirty question. She'd fought long to come to the decision to stay with him, and of course he hadn't forgotten. Was he really just delirious? After all, her body felt so cold right now that he had to have a fever, right?

“I am.. looking forward.. to living a relaxed life with you.. and you know it. You know what it is

like to be the one left out as everyone celebrates around you, yes? I want to live a stable life. I do not even care about Yoitsu anymore. I now know that.. I do not have to go watch over it all alone. I have never been as happy as when you tried to comfort me in Lesco.. it never quite sank in that I did not have to be alone..”

Holo scratched her nose. Lawrence knew how sincere she was by her reaction when she returned from Kinisen. That wasn't an act, she really did love him and rely on him. Despite their many arguments, it had all worked out. They had helped each other to survive, and live through events that shattered their confidence. He would never hesitate to shout out loud that she was the most important thing in his life.

But did he have the right to hold her in his arms?

“But..”

He wanted to press on, but Holo didn't let him.

“Will you.. please stop already?”

Time froze for an instant as Holo lifted her face to look at his.

“You still do not realize what you cannot give up.”

It felt like she had stabbed him with her words.

“You have been chasing after me all this time, but now what? There are things more important to you that you are forgetting to treasure, no?”

“Forgetting.. to treasure..?”

Holo's face contorted at his question, like she was worried that she had cut a little too deeply.

“How long must you fight? You are a good man. I know what you can and cannot forgive just by looking at you. Is this fight really more important to you, something you cannot step away from? Are they the ones you wish to protect? If so, then why are you holding my hand? You-”

She was both angry and sad now, to the point where she could barely talk straight.

“I am your princess, am I not?”

In his shock, Lawrence could only stare back at Holo. If she was even calling herself a princess, then she was down to using every trick she could on him. Why was he making her do all of this? He was the idiot who ignored her plea to settle down, and he was the one that had dragged her into this situation.

Deep down, she didn't want to be here to ease his conscience. She really did want to leave. After all, she was the one who knew best how painful it was to let go of the past. And yet he was the one dragging her back into that past. Her fears were coming true. She was losing her grip on the very hand she had finally decided to hold, and not even because of the natural passage of time.

Even children realized that “happily ever after” stories were just that - stories. Lawrence may have felt like he was holding her hand in some story, but now that he had finally won her over, he had a responsibility to look after himself as well as her. It all made sense now. He looked back at her, wondering how he'd missed this simple fact for so long.

Maybe he was just not cut out for common sense, or maybe he'd just forgotten that he wasn't some character in a storybook. He didn't have to give everything away like some hero before he won the fair maiden's heart and a happy ending. This was reality. His story could go on after this page was turned, and he was responsible for turning that page. How childish could he be?

“I want to live a quiet life with you..”

Opening a modest shop and living with his regret over his recent actions *was* a possibility. It meant being happy. Very happy. The kind of idyllic happiness that he'd always scorned. It was the life of a merchant who had no ambitions. The life of one who had given up and just wanted some stability. It wasn't the life of one who wanted to soar in skies of gold.

A person grew up over the course of his or her daily travels. Lawrence had mistaken himself for being mature, when he was really just childishly living an exciting life with Holo. He'd managed to keep her at his side, and she had placed her trust in him. He had chosen to be with her, and so he had to bear the responsibility and compromises that came along with that. That was being mature.

Truth be told, he didn't really mind that idea. It was thrilling just to be with Holo.

The common wisdom was that people matured as they aged. Lawrence considered himself mature, but that only revealed his childishness. And truth be told, that childishness was what let him have so much fun with Holo. It was why he'd been able to convince her to stay with him, and why she could trust him. He was learning what it meant to be in an adult relationship.

He reached his hand out to her, but she just looked at it with sadness in her eyes. Those eyes only closed when his hand finally touched her face. As he pulled her body to his, he realized just how taken he had been by Hildir's exciting merchant's dream. He had been so angry at Diva's evil and Hugo's betrayal that his blood boiled.

He could no longer let himself suffer such lapses. Everything was different when one came to find a person that was more important than anything else in the world. Holo was right: this really wasn't such a bad destiny to have. Having come to terms with that, he tightened his hold

on her and called out to her.

“Holo..”

Her ear twitched, and she finally looked up. She was not happy. Her expression made it clear that she was only able to accept her decision because she had him to share in it. It would have been painful for a wolf who thanklessly protected fields of wheat to leave behind Hildir and the mercenaries. That's why they had to protect what was more important to them.

He let go of Holo, taking her hand instead. In the next moment, she nodded. His lonely journey was over. What remained was the immense dizziness making him lean against the wall. She instantly moved to support him, but that wasn't going to be enough.

“I'm.. fine..”

“Fool. Come on, hold me.”

As she propped him up, he wondered how people could live with being so dependent on one another. Was there anything more sickening? Still, the moment he moved to walk he heard someone knocking on a door downstairs. It was all the louder on such a quiet morning, and it could only make everyone worry.

The sleepy boy soon emerged from the room to go downstairs, and after a muffled conversation there were heavy footsteps coming back upstairs. The door at the end of the hall reopened, and out came Moid and another man. Lawrence had only ever seen him in another form, but it was a skill of merchants to recognize the faintest features. He knew it was Hildir.

His silver hair and hermit-like eyes revealed a creature of wisdom. His face was covered by facial hair, but not enough to hide his determination. Lawrence was suddenly happy he had only ever dealt with this intimidating man in his rabbit form; he would have been too nervous to make any decisions if he had seen him like this. After a brief glance at Holo and Lawrence, Moid walked ahead with Hildir trailing behind him.

“Have you decided?”

He asked his brief question, but already had his answer the moment he saw Holo's hand in Lawrence's. As he did, his stark eyes melted into friendly ones with a great deal of warmth behind them. He didn't have it in his heart to blame those who had to flee. He simply patted Holo's shoulder with his rough-looking hand, then Lawrence's arm. It felt a bit like a priest giving them his blessing.

“I hope you two will be happy.”

Lawrence immediately suspected that Hildir intentionally avoided ending that line with “at

least". Was he teasing them? At any rate, Lawrence didn't have a reply, so he politely changed the topic.

"What's going on?"

Such a question would normally be met with a blank stare, and at best a polite reminder to mind his own business. But Hildir looked at Lawrence, closed his eyes, and replied upon reopening them.

"This inn has been surrounded by soldiers."

"What?"

"The leader of the township has arrived, and it seems he will not be receiving us very warmly."

Hildir's words weren't spoken with nervousness, so it was clear that he wasn't going to give up. He had probably lived through similar events before, making it easier for him to remain calm now.

"Still, they can't keep us surrounded all the time, so please take the first good chance to run. I must be off now."

With that, he left. He was still keeping calm in the face of that news. It felt like he was cut from an entirely different, more adventurous cloth that gave him abilities Lawrence could only admire. He and Holo sent him off with their eyes, but he didn't get far before they heard some kind of struggle downstairs.

"Please hold on a moment!"

Hildir froze; had they been attacked? Lawrence instinctively moved in front of Holo, when-

"Hey!"

Someone in a long coat had ignored the pleas and was walking up the stairs, where he spotted Hildir. He seemed old, but still younger than Hildir. His hair was well-trimmed, and he instantly gave off an air of wealth and power. His clothes weren't a perfect fit for that image, however, giving off more of a straightforward and stern impression. In short, he looked like he might be a proper merchant - not the kind who struck big deals, but the kind who sought out long-term opportunities. He looked Hildir over and spoke.

"Too obvious."

After two more steps, he spotted Lawrence and Holo and looked at them the same way.

"As are you."

Lawrence had no idea what he meant, but he did feel Holo tense up and whisper behind him.

“I.. cannot believe it..”

“I do not come with good tidings. Please take me to a room!”

“Sir Milicky!”

Moid tried to calm him down, but a sharp glare from Milicky stopped the experienced mercenary dead in his tracks. Only then did Hildir finally speak.

“..Jan Milicky?”

“Yes, or at least that is the name I use as the head merchant of the Municipal Council of Sovereign.”

Milicky took firm steps all the way up to Hildir, revealing that he was even taller than Hildir was. Shorter than Moid and Reginald, perhaps, but still tall enough to exude pressure on others.

“My true name is Kristoph von Hebrasche.”

“What..?”

Hildir was stunned, especially when Milicky quickly turned his poker face to him.

“I already doubted the information I received before dawn, but it is even more difficult to accept that you do not know my true identity.”

Milicky, or rather Hebrasche, walked straight past Hildir and came up to Lawrence. He then bowed next to him, at Holo.

“I know of your achievements.”

However, Holo suddenly slapped Milicky's hand away. Everyone was surprised by her reaction, even her. It seemed to be an instinctive response, given how she stared at him and held her right hand with her left. Lawrence was used to seeing her slap faces, not hands, but what truly shocked him was that look of fear in her eyes.

“A powerful first impression, as expected. But I am not here for a social call. Let us talk inside the room. A fire is lit, yes?”

Hildir was running his hand through his hair, muttering to himself, but now regained his composure.

“This way, please.”

He led Milicky there while Holo stared at him, frozen in place. Lawrence was sure of it now.

“He's.. not human, is he?”

This was the north, after all; a place full of pristine mountains and forests.

“About half.”

Lawrence couldn't believe her response, and looked at Milicky himself. The moment he did so, Milicky stopped as if having sensed it.

“Please join us. You two have a duty to be present as well.”

Holo put on her usual act of having not heard someone, but Lawrence could feel her grip on his sleeve tighten. He held her in response, only able to reply on their behalf.



“Whatever questions you have, just ask.”

They were as good as dead if they tried to run. A rabbit and a wolf had come to a town, led by mercenaries. It was obvious they were related, so if Lawrence made a break for it now he would only make things worse for Moid and Hildir. Being hurt didn't help his odds, either. Holo couldn't even transform in a small space like this, so one false move could spell their doom. Lawrence had to lean on Holo to walk forward this time, with Milicky waiting for them at the door and watching.

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There were only four people in the finest room of the inn: Hildir, Milicky, Holo, and Lawrence. Moid wanted to join them, but was refused by Milicky. Normally, Moid would have stubbornly joined in regardless, but he seemed to detect something about the fact that Holo and Lawrence were invited, and so he just followed Milicky's instructions to keep a watch outside their room.

“Well!”

Milicky was the one who broke the silence.

“You've brought quite the storm to our little town!”

He was obviously downplaying the importance of Sovereign, which was a vital transportation hub for the north. The northern barons were reputed to all be ignorant and arrogant. Did Milicky fit that description? Living on this land, and speaking in this way.. oddly suited him.

“The Hebrasche name has kept the peace for two centuries now. Even the Churches' incursions haven't ruined that. Even the most ambitious invader is dismayed by deep valleys and tall mountains, but this town doesn't enjoy such defense. Why have you brought our enemies here! Why couldn't you keep this little war to yourselves, Diva company?”

He seemed reasonable, but Hildir was not deterred.

“Yes, we have brought enemies with us. But they are the reason that we are here. We plan to make up for that.”

“Make up for it?”

Milicky wasn't having any of it.

“Surely you jest? Have you any idea how many warriors are camped south of our town? Our reports estimated thousands, all lead by captains! Did you think they were here to settle your little dispute out in the fields? No, they plan on invading us!”

Diva was dead serious about that, in fact. For thousands of men, all lead by captains, to be

present made that obvious. They all had fought under banners like the Myuri mercenaries did. They wouldn't fight in mountains and valleys, only on fields or in towns. Diva had chased Hildir here by buying the loyalty of the Hugo mercenaries. They wanted their names to go down in history. They planned to overrun Sovereign as the first of their conquests.

“You clearly know all of this. That rare bird who came yesterday was surely your friend.”

Hildir's silence was as good as any admission. Milicky then turned to Holo.

“And why would such a proud wolf let herself get caught up in such a mess?”

He even knew that Holo was a wolf. Her judgement that he was “about half” surely referred to how much of him was human.

“I hear that you saved him. Does that mean you insist on helping-”

“I do not.”

Milicky stopped as Holo cut him off, and raised an eyebrow in pleasant surprise.

“Ah.. so you are rational.”

Was he being sarcastic? Maybe not.. it seemed like he wasn't, at any rate. He turned back to Hildir.

“A foolish dream does not a great man make. Greatness is measured by how responsibly one wields their power; by whether they understand that the mountain cannot be moved, not even one small stone at a time. Only those who play with small stones have such delusions. I essentially manage this town's commerce, so I'm quite aware of your delusions. They are the reason why we distanced ourselves from Diva company. You sent all those envoys, but never came yourself. If you had, you would have anticipated this outcome.”

This manager of commerce in Sovereign was the same man Hildir was pinning all of his hopes on. Hildir was entirely unaware of that fact, because it wasn't rare for barons to also be on municipal councils, and Hildir had not checked himself. Milicky was right: Diva's fragmentation wasn't something that sprang up overnight. Hildir had been so occupied with running his company in Lesco that he didn't realize that.

“Spending too much time in the world of business can make you feel like the very world is in your grasp. You are so busy reaching up for the sun that you do not even think to look down and see the cliff you are heading toward. I took Jan Milicky's name some five years ago. He was a great man, but frail. When he died, I felt I owed it to him to take over his management of this town's affairs. There was no subterfuge, no trickery. But somehow you weren't aware. You came because you thought there were other barons that could help your little cause, yes?”

In other words, Hildir had been so blinded by his determination that he had ignored the smaller details. Hildir couldn't dispute that. Once his people felt they had enough people on their side, they seized control. He really had no way out of this accusation.

“Then why did you reply that you wanted to cooperate?”

Hildir calmly tried to find a foothold for a counterattack.

“Why else? If we hadn't, we'd lose track of you. None of the villages have enough food for the winter already, so if all those starving mercenaries show up then many people might not live to see spring. Far safer to trick you into coming here where we can minimize that risk.”

His earlier statement that his family had kept the peace for centuries wasn't just talk. Hildir calmly continued.

“Then you plan to hand us over to them?”

Hildir, Moid, and Holo must have talked while Lawrence was recovering and already arrived at this conclusion. At first they would wonder why.. was it because they were too outnumbered? Because their captain was wounded? No, by the time they finished talking they would have seen the simple truth. No one from the town had come to talk to them since they had arrived.

“What else can I do?”

Milicky was blunt, but Hildir wasn't a man who dreamed that unrealistically, so he had already made up his mind.

“But not all of us, alright? Just me.”

“Fine.”

Milicky's tone didn't change. He made it sound like it was a matter of course; that Hildir should know this was his fate already. Profiting required taking risks, but with an army this large at their doorstep, betraying him for money, a life meant nothing. He had to have been ready to take that risk, since the profit he sought was colossal. He had bet with his own life.

“That's what I would have said if you came to visit me earlier. But now, I'll need more from you.”

“Well! You sure don't know when to give up. You're not in your own court here. It doesn't work that way.”

It was a rational assessment, but a horrible one. Hildir changed his tone to one of challenge. Lawrence was starting to see that this merchant he thought was great was so taken in by his

dream that he might as well be an excited youth with a haphazard idea of how to succeed. Regardless, he was doing his best to bargain.

“This was never just about us. If our plan succeeds, the north will be able to keep its long peace. Once enough barons unite this region under one currency, the others only stand to lose. Those living this far north have to look to others for supplies, and a common currency will be stronger than any army when it comes to such business. We're certain we can build something great under such conditions.. even bringing all these barons together under one banner, which not even the Church could do!”

That was essentially what Lawrence had excitedly reasoned in Lesco. Hildir was now making the same case to Hebrasche, though Lawrence wasn't sure if it was a plea for trust more than an attempt to convince him of their plans. Still, Milicky was clearly not interested. No one wanted to be the side that was going to be brought under control. And yet, he didn't look at Hildir with contempt, but rather as a patient father might view a son discussing a foolish dream.

“And how can you guarantee that merchants will do a better job than barons have at running this world?”

Hildir was rendered speechless. No one could give such a guarantee, since power corrupted. Many kings began their rule with noble intents, only to spiral into out of control tyrants. The only proof could be one's behavior, and Hildir clearly wanted to use that argument, but Lawrence decided to cut him off.

“Merchants are traders, and trade is based entirely on profits.. and profits come about from making people happy.”

Lawrence wasn't able to dream along with Hildir, but he wasn't strong enough to stay silent when that dream was being torn apart so cruelly.

“Wow.”

Milicky looked at him like a child to be praised for his seriousness, but Lawrence wasn't angry about that. Dreams were childish things, and even Hildir nodded when he heard Lawrence talk, so there was no need to be ashamed.

“If someone innocent said that to me, I'd have smacked some sense into him. But you're hardly innocent, are you?”

He stared at Lawrence's wounded leg, then turned his eyes on Holo.

“You can still say those things, even after seeing what they lead to?”

“Ask yourself that.”

Hildir suddenly talked back to Milicky.

“What do you mean?”

“There are those who would stand against the Diva company, and I am of use to them.”

The smaller a town was, the faster rumors spread through them. By now, many would have noticed or heard that a band of people had run into town before daybreak. At least some of them would know of the Myuri mercenaries, who had a reputation in the north, and if they learned that Hildir was here then even the dimmest of them could piece together that Diva had been overthrown.

The enemy of one's enemy could be their ally, and if they had once been the heart of their enemy, they could be a very, very strong ally indeed.

“You want to bring them under your control too, then?”

“No, what I mean is that there's an ugly truth you are missing: Diva is now only being driven by greed. They must be stopped.”

Hildir and Milicky stared at one other in silence. Milicky was the one to eventually break that silence.

“Really? Then let's do that. Well, try to.”

“Didn't you just tell me to hand myself over to them?”

Milicky smiled at Hildir's torment.

“I could catch you whenever I wish. Of course I'd think twice, if you weren't a rabbit.”

He was obviously comparing Hildir to Holo.

“Will you grant us mobility?”

“If you wish it. That is, if you can bring my people under one banner, like the Church tried to, like the flag-waving barons tried to.”

Milicky rose. He wasn't just challenging Hildir for fun. He wasn't joking; he was confident. That attitude was what made him seem authoritative, even if he wasn't tall or formal enough to warrant such behavior normally.

“But what of the fight?”

Sovereign would crumble if they fought here, and that was why Milicky wanted Hildir to take the fight into the open. Lawrence had asked because he had no idea what he was really thinking, but Milicky didn't give him time to wonder.

“If you were truly that slow, I couldn't possibly help you. But you're not - you're quite clever in fact, so that is none of your business.”

Being called clever by someone like him wasn't ingratiating, but it was clearly sincere on some level. Was he just trying to say that Lawrence didn't have the experience to help them? Lawrence quietly stared at Milicky.

“This world is so hard to change precisely because barons like you exist.”

Milicky shot him a rare smile.

“Hahaha! And yet-”

Milicky spotted some dirt under his nail, and used his thumb to carefully flick it away. His act was so perfect that he could fool anyone.

“If this world could change that way, then those in power would have already changed it.”

He was staring at Holo as he said that, and her eyes narrowed like she was staring at some malicious cat. Milicky smiled at her reaction, then turned back to Hildir, who had been staring at him.

“Just how much do you plan to sell this town for?”

Hildir was obviously issuing a challenge, but by then it was obvious that it was the only way to get an answer out of Milicky. It was only possible to tug at heartstrings that existed, after all. If those didn't exist, you could only anger someone and judge them by their reactions.

“Money? Yay, money! It's a wonderful thing!”

His laugh sent a chill down Lawrence's spine, and he wasn't the only one who seemed nervous: even Holo tensed up visibly.

“Only fur and amber passes through this town. The craftsmen are left, and no visitors stay. They only pass through, just like the weapon-minded fools who try to launch excursions from here. All that lies beyond is snowy mountains. Treacherous ones. All those fools will leave is a trail of footprints to be inevitably covered by more snow. We're all but footprints to be covered over by the passage of time.”

He spoke smoothly, but with obvious spite. Lawrence finally realized that he was caught by the same trap that Holo had been caught in; the chief difference was that he loathed his inability to

alter fate.

“You're quite the poet.”

It was one who believed that fate could be altered that spoke up: Hildir.

“And you're too talkative!”

This was Kristoph von Hebrasche, who went by Jan Milicky in this town. In an instant, he had determined that Hildir and Holo weren't human, and according to Holo he was only half human himself. He might act strangely, but his status was assured. His capabilities, too: hiding one's identity was never an easy task. Even Huskins, the Golden Sheep, had to resort to eating the meat of his sheep kin to maintain his cover. It would be a mistake to think he was just some half-human baron with a grudge.

“Yes, you are, for one who so underestimated money!”

“I have learned from my mistakes!”

Hildir had been betrayed by his people, then again by the Hugo mercenaries. Milicky wasn't looking at his peer with condemnation, but rather empathy.

“Is that so? Well, then I'll take my leave.”

With that, he left the room. As the door closed behind him, Hildir cast his eyes downward and sighed. He was unwelcome here, which effectively meant that he had failed. He hadn't even gathered the most basic of information, and wasn't aware that Jan Milicky was actually Kristoph von Hebrasche. Convincing such a man as him wouldn't be possible now.

But then, what options were left to Hildir? Assassinating him? Running away? Surrendering? They were all horrible choices, and none of them would bear edible fruit.

“Do we have any chance?”

Lawrence was so worried that he couldn't help but ask. Hildir had made a promise with Holo, and had a handle on the basic situation. The look on his face begged the question, “What will you do if I say no?” But, he already knew that Lawrence wasn't the type to run so he actually gave a simple reply.

“Yes.”

A great merchant would never give up without a fight. Even the stubbornest of traveling merchants couldn't hope to match their stubbornness.

“I manage the books at Diva, so I know what they need to keep it running. All we have to do is

get everything inside the gates and close them. They'll have no choice but to back off then.”

He said that, but the men outside those gates would be mercenaries who were experts at besieging towns. How could they possibly hold the gate?

“They simply don't have the capital to take over a town.”

What? Had Diva run out of money?

“They're just like me; they have to keep the barons, mercenaries and Lesco running on the promise of the new currency. But there's just not enough raw material to make it happen yet. It'll take too long for them to gather enough, and even longer to mint the coins. So what if we have more money here than they have to pay everyone? If they run out of money to pay all those travelers and farmers in the north, what then?”

Then, everyone would have to give up on the new currency and settle for the poorer ones again. Their investment would fizzle, never to be appealing again. They would earn the wrath of the landlords that had already promised to pay others with the now-depreciating currency. It was all such a revelation that Lawrence was surprised Hildir had been so calm about the situation.

“I still remember the most important numbers, and by now they would have exhausted too much of their capital by hiring thousands of mercenaries like this.”

Their daily earnings came from the large number of travelers to visit Lesco, and those earnings would be so tremendous for a large company like Diva that Lawrence couldn't even estimate them. However, Hildir could remember such things just like Lawrence could remember each of the trades he'd made in his life. Merchants remembered such things.

“That's why they planned for us to surrender. It would save them money, and our surrender would make it seem like they had unlimited capital. They're being way too showy right now just for the sake of capturing one former bookkeeper and a small band of mercenaries, however capable. They're down to using the same tactics we are: threats.”

It was vital to never forget what weapons were at one's disposal, and at the enemies' disposal. The problem could be put into perspective with that information.

“In other words, their one concern is that we'll shut the gate. Once it's shut, we can negotiate, and Diva will be have to be content with *our* terms of surrender.”

Had Milicky realized the same thing? Or had Diva perhaps written him to ask that the gate be left open? What if he didn't find Hildir's plan acceptable, or if that “poet” in him just decided the situation wasn't in his favor and he opened the gate for them? Diva wouldn't have underestimated Hildir's capabilities; they would know he was familiar with their situation and

that he knew they were running out of money.

This was all a complex mental game being played by Hildir, Diva, and Milicky. Whose plan was the weakest? Who would chicken out first? Lawrence was terrified that he wasn't cut out for such a battle.

“Commerce is like a battlefield.. I understand what that means now.”

He looked up.

“I'm just a traveling merchant. I buy and sell things. This isn't my battlefield.”

Holo sighed, and Hildir showed a gentle smile. They were like two parents who were glad their child had realized that mountains couldn't be moved. It soon became noisy outside; it seemed that Milicky had ordered his soldiers to retreat. The sound of their footsteps was soon drowned out by other, faster ones. It was Moid.

“What did you talk about?”

Hildir didn't even look up at first. Putting their discussion into words wasn't going to be easy, and a simple summary would be impossible.

“It'll take a while to explain.”

They clearly hadn't considered everything, and it felt like there was a lot of room for error. Hildir even looked up at Holo.

“Do you find something funny?”

She seemed utterly bored.

“No, more like.. admirable.”

She had long since given up on the belief that the world could be changed like this. In fact, she was patting Lawrence on the head like it was the only thing she could do to console him after he'd just realized it himself. She soon stood up, and helped Lawrence leave with her.

“Lawrence!”

Hildir shouted out to them. Holo wasn't about to stop, but Lawrence leaned on her shoulder and turned to respond.

“Yes?”

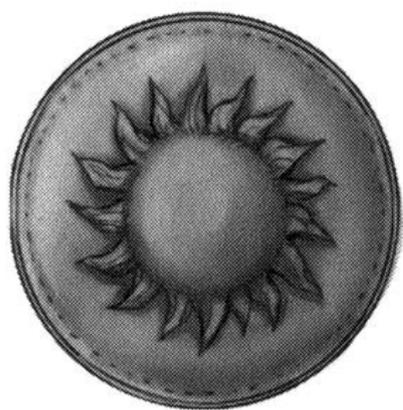
“You really stood up to Sir Milicky like a great man. Don't ever forget that. If you don't, then

your shop should always be successful.”

“..Thank you.”

Lawrence felt no better to hear those words, but all he could do was be polite in turn. He still left with Holo, knowing that it wasn't such a bad conclusion for a traveling peddler who had just had his dreams shattered.

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## Chapter 11

Lawrence slept as much as possible to speed his recovery, and it was working. He had recovered enough to talk with Holo over breakfast, and enjoy the fresh bread the bakery had delivered to the inn for Hildir and the mercenaries.

Hildir hadn't been expecting the reception they actually got, since the people of the town were fearful of Diva company's violence and knew that Hildir was the one bringing it to them. And yet, there were many people trying to get a peek inside the inn. Hunters, farmers, merchants and craftsmen were all terrified of war and how it would impact their lives. It seemed their curiosity was getting the best of them because it was Hildir.

Lawrence sometimes got a good chuckle when people shared their goals and dreams, but this time the dream resonated with him. If the municipal council of Sovereign had no idea what to do about the Diva company, then a war might actually bring about positive change by shaking things up. Even if Milicky welcomed Diva, he couldn't really stop them and avoid the town's destruction. They were too powerful, and luck wouldn't be on his side this time.

Milicky was just as afraid of destiny as he was of Holo, and strongly believed that the world couldn't be changed this way. Hildir, however, had one advantage: he was a new face. In comparison, the people who delivered their bread didn't even give the soldiers watching the inn the time of day. To them, Hildir and the Myuri mercenaries represented "righteousness."

"Hey."

Holo suddenly spoke up as Lawrence stared out the window after eating.

"What?"

"Hold my wrist."

She rolled up her sleeve to expose her wrist. Lawrence was confused, but did as he was told.

"As tightly as you can."

"Huh?"

His confusion deepened as much as he tightened his grip on her wrist. It was just a normal girl's wrist, the kind that looked easily injured. Obviously, he would never do that to her, so he slowly applied force and readied himself to stop when she reacted with pain. When she didn't do so, he decided to take things seriously. By the time he released his grip, he had left a clear mark on her wrist. And yet, she seemed oddly happy to see it.

“That is good.”

“Uh, what?”

He felt anxious to leave a mark on her body like that, it felt horrible.

“Your strength is returning. You should be well enough soon.”

Ah, so she was testing how soon he would be ready for their departure.

“So we're.. moving on?”

He paused to omit the word “finally”, which would have been a bit too rich to hear from him. Of course, Holo caught onto that anyhow and was already tugging his beard.

“Yes.”

They were abandoning Hildir and the Myuri mercenaries and fleeing town. It wasn't something one would forget in a lifetime. All they could do now was hope they would survive to meet again in the future. Lawrence had to abandon people to wolves before, and Holo had probably been like those wolves at some point in her past.

But this wasn't the same kind of situation, they were leaving behind people who had a fighting chance. Hildir was still standing and they were armed, so it was easier for Lawrence and Holo to move on. Lawrence felt he had to help steer the conversation ahead.

“In that case, shall we head back to Lenos first?”

“Why there? Are there not livelier places we could visit?”

“In the south, sure. There were a lot of big places like Ruvineigen on my trading route before I met you. The weather's nicer too, so it makes for happier traveling.”

Winter was ending; spring was just around the corner. Summer would come sooner enough, and that was the best time of year to be out on the road. It would also be fun to scout for a shop, since he didn't stress out as much about risks as he used to. He no longer had to put his life on the line to raise the capital for a shop, nor perform a delicate balancing act around Holo. He'd gained perspective on their journey, and now knew what he needed to do. Any quarrels between them would be manageable now, and he would make sure to stay on the right path. With Holo at his side, he had to be responsible.

“Then I should go take care of our provisions.”

“Oh? Uh, thanks..”

He was so confused he just kept holding her hand until she replied.

“I have had enough of your hand. I need money now. Money!”

Oh, was that what she meant? He wasn't sure if she was just toying with him, but he didn't let go of her hand until he placed his wallet in it. He had never given anyone his wallet before, but he didn't have to think twice about giving it to her. It wasn't even because he was too injured to join her, but simply because he could just as easily hand his life over to her now.

“Alright! I wonder what to buy?”

“Just don't waste too much!”

She turned around and stuck her tongue out at that, so it was obviously what she was waiting to hear. Her ears and tail were happily flicking at the air. It was enough to make him nervous, but only a little. When she finally left his sight, he had no choice but to look outside again. All he saw was a typical northern town, bustling as always.

He was looking to catch another glimpse of Holo, but when he remembered there was a back door in the inn, his hopes were dashed. She would surely make sport of him by taking that route, wouldn't she? He laughed, but stopped when he saw a bird gracefully swooping into the room below his. It was Louis, of course, and despite having seen him before Lawrence was still amazed by his appearance.

In the end, Louis' flight path had cast Lawrence's eyes downward, where he saw the unbelievable. Holo was there at the entrance of the building, looking up at him. She even seemed to be smiling. The Wisewolf Holo was smiling up at him. He didn't have much choice but to call her name and smile back, did he?

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Lawrence and Holo eventually went to see Myuri. His head was bandaged. His hand and legs were cut up. His knee was broken. He was battered. He was still unconscious. At least his expression was peaceful. Holo said nothing at all, until she bowed down to touch her forehead against his.

“Be a wolf.”

That was all she said before she and Lawrence left. Her expression was much the same as always, but Lawrence could tell how tenuous that mask was.

They wandered off to say farewell to Moid and Hildir, but Moid had to tend to his duties in town and wasn't present to see them off. The inn was busy with people coming and going now, so it was clear he had been hard at work gathering supporters to give them a fighting chance.

Moid and Hildir could make this work. A merchant who knew how to allocate people to get the most out of them, and a staff sergeant who could encourage outnumbered soldiers with but a word should be able to draw the townspeople to their cause and shut the gate on Diva. Only then would the company be forced into a stalemate where they had to bargain.

Their thousands of soldiers were, as Hildir said, a terrible drain on their resources. Every day was crucial for them, and this was just the start of their campaign. They had no choice but to efficiently conquer this town with minimal losses, or their resources would become too limited to complete their task.

That said, conquering a town had to be done properly. It was just as risky to incur the hatred of Sovereign by foolishly injuring their people. Anyone could see that Hildir wasn't disadvantaged, even if Milicky was also correct in his own assessment. It was just that they had no choice but to do this now.

Now that he was shaking hands with Hildir, all of these thoughts bubbled to the top of Lawrence's mind.

“Now then, here are the gold coins you entrusted to us.”

They had been waiting for just this chance to return those to Hildir. It was an amount of money Lawrence had never handled in his life. It made him feel a bit lonely to part with them, but it also eased his mind tremendously.

“And here is the banned book.”

Hildir nodded as he took the book and the coins.

“My thanks to you, but this book-”

Hildir's question was cut off by an annoyed-looking Holo.

“Just do what you will with it. 'Tis useless to us now.”

Even if Hildir were to lose, Holo could probably hunt the book down again without too much trouble.

“I understand. Well then.. hmm? What's this?”

Hildir finally spotted the other article in the pouch.

“Holo received it from-”

“From the bird. He asked me to hand it to you in secret, and it has worn on my patience.”

Hildir pulled it out with a serious look in his eyes. It was an object shorter than a ceremonial short sword, but much larger than a stamp with his company's seal on it. In fact, Lawrence wasn't sure if he'd correctly guessed what it was until he saw Hildir's reaction just now.

“This is..”

He held that object in his right hand so it wasn't surprising that it was shivering, given that his right shoulder had been injured. And yet, he was clutching it far too hard for that to be the reason; in fact both of his shoulders began trembling as he lowered his eyes.

“I.. finally have it..”

“Be thankful for Louis' courage.”

Lawrence's words were met with a glance from Hildir, who studied the object for a moment before raising it to his forehead and closing his eyes again. It was like he was holding the key to saving the world. Nothing more needed to be said, so Lawrence and Holo exchanged glances before nodding and bidding Hildir farewell.

“Please wait a moment!”

Hildir stopped them.

“Perhaps you already know what this is, but since you've carried it, I feel I obligated to tell you just in case.”

Despite saying so, he didn't even give them time to react. His eyes were already tearing up as he removed the object from its cloth wrappings.

“..”

Lawrence was awestruck by its unveiling. It was a hammer, though not a normal one. It was the kind used to mint coins. And not just any coins, of course. It was beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was for minting Diva's would-be currency. It was the tool that bridged Hildir and Diva to their dream, and he stared at it now like an infant was in his arms.

Such hammers would be worn out after minting perhaps two hundred coins, so Diva would have dozens of them. Stealing one hammer for Hildir would not stop Diva, who would go right on ahead and melt down other coins to make their own with the hammers they had left. This was a symbolic victory, one reminding Diva of the dream that had brought them here.

“Mr. Hildir..”

Hildir was still gazing at his child as Lawrence called out to him.

“May I see it?”

Lawrence had been wondering what image they would mint onto their coins. The mercenaries wouldn't agree on a particular ruler, so a person's profile wasn't going to be met with approval. Besides, that wouldn't be a strong enough symbol to unite the people of the north. Lawrence also suspected that mountains weren't an option either, given that Diva company's mining efforts had scarred many a mountain.

As such, Lawrence believed they might select an image representing power and fear, at least until he'd met Hildir. And now, having seen Hildir's reaction, he thought he might finally know what it was. Hildir's version of Diva wasn't a company that thought to oppress people, but a company of dreamers. They truly believe they could change the world.

“Of course. That's why I asked you to wait.”

Hildir lifted the hammer to reveal the stamp on its underside to Lawrence. It took Lawrence's breath away. Not because he was surprised or sad, but simply because it was just the kind of image that would make him smile, too. Just like the people of the north, who endured in this colorless and frozen land. It was the sun. Hildir wanted to rule the land with the warmth of the sun.

“I hope you'll remember this foolish merchant and his stupid dreams for the north.”

Lawrence had no words worthy of being given a voice, so he lowered his eyes silently.

“Sorry for wasting your time on this. May the sun protect you.”

If he wasn't looking to God for protection, then Lawrence and Holo could leave with their minds at ease.

“Mr. Hildir!”

That was when a young worker suddenly burst into the room. He spotted Holo and Lawrence before running into them, and nervously threw himself in another direction. Being unable to stop, he came crashing down at Hildir's feet.

“Mr. Hildir! A message from Mr. Moid! Diva has sent a messenger into town!”

“What?”

Hildir's personality immediately snapped back into a serious merchant as he was re-wrapped the minting hammer back into its cloth. His hands were frozen in the middle of that task as he focused on the problematic announcement.. and so did Lawrence.



“A messenger..?”

Hildir spoke to himself as he considered this news.

“Why..?”

A messenger would only be sent into town to try to negotiate before a war, so was Milicky letting them in because he hoped to find a peaceful resolution? Or was he just playing both sides? The townspeople would only see a messenger as coming to declare war on them, since negotiations had already broken down and the gates had been shut.

Since the town had already seen that Hildir was on their side of the gate, Milicky was taking a risk. The people might rebel, thinking that he was betraying them to make a deal with the devil. Why would he make such a gamble? Was this his plan all along, or some kind of trap he had set?

The more Lawrence thought about it, the more the answer came into focus. It took him longer than usual because it was so deviously simple. The messenger was here to win over the hearts of the townspeople. If they did so, the reopened negotiations with Milicky would put Hildir in serious trouble.

If Milicky had come to an agreement with them already, then that would explain why only a messenger had been sent: seeing an army heading their way would have made the people lynch Milicky on the spot.

“And, Mr. Hildir..”

“There's more?”

At Hildir's prompting, the young man found the courage to continue.

“Their messenger wants to negotiate with you.”

This was entirely beyond belief. Hildir quickly looked out the window, then back at Lawrence.

“It's too dangerous for you two to leave. Milicky must be on his way.”

If they acted carelessly now, Lawrence and Holo could be treated as spies. Even if they weren't under suspicion, they would be hunted down and Holo's ears and tail might be exposed.

“Of course. We'll stay here and lay low.”

“Please do! No one else is running, so all of their focus would be on the two of you.”

If they fled like fools it not only risked bringing trouble to Moid and Hildir, but also to Holo.

Lawrence didn't even need Hildir to urge him to know better.

“But.. then.. hmm.. what..?”

Hildir was holding a major deliberation in his mind. He clearly wasn't able to figure out the reason the messenger was sent. Why would they be out to negotiate with him? It would never work. They weren't planning on stepping down, since they'd brought an army like this, so were they just trying to get Hildir out in the open to force him into a corner?

“Just go meet with him.”

Holo finally spoke her mind.

“You do not have enough information, but that has never stopped you from cleverly taking advantage of the situation. You can do the same now.”

The Wisewolf's words were able to calm the mind of any merchant, no matter how mighty.

“Thank you so much.”

“Hmph.”

Hildir began walking out of the room with the young worker's help, as Holo lifted up the half-wrapped hammer. She studied it with her fingers before muttering.

“How stupid. It must be a male's doing.”

With that, she casually flung the hammer back onto the cloth.

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“Is Mr. Hildir Schunard here?”

A voice was heard. Lawrence and Holo took a peek out the window at the giant crowd. There was Milicky, on a horse in the middle of the crowd with his guards surrounding him. There was also a lavishly-dressed man who was presumably the messenger.

His leather hat was his most prominent feature from the second floor, but his fine coat and golden horse-reins were also quite visible. His procession also wore similar costumes, and there was a riderless horse laden with goods. The messenger sat proudly on horseback, rather than with the seriousness the situation seemed to call for. He clearly felt they had won already.

And yet, the townfolks surrounding them weren't just casual observers; they were butchers with cleavers and bakers with rolling pins heavier than a club. All of them were staring their enemy down. Of course, mercenaries had come along with Diva's men to ensure things weren't

going to quickly escalate, so no side held a definite advantage in numbers.

Even Myuri's mercenaries were watching the event, now staring at the soldier who was calling for Hildir to come out. The other pieces were in place, so when the inn door opened and Hildir emerged, the townsfolk saw it as a sign that their leader was coming out to fight.

“This is a negotiation! Why do you raise your weapons at the messenger?”

The excited crowd calmed themselves at Hildir's bellow.

“Mr. Hildir Schunard?”

Hildir replied to the soldier with a simple, “yes.”

“We have allowed the messenger to come, and wish to arrange for the negotiations.”

The crowd began murmuring to one another about the defensive walls they had to protect their town. There were many who wished to occupy this place; barons who regarded the common folk as little more than leaves on the ground, thieves who lived for conquest, a Church that was only capable of burning pagans, and greedy merchants.

And that was just the humans; there were also wolves and bears to worry about. The townsfolk weren't about to sit back and let themselves be conquered, but Milicky gave them no more mind than flies buzzing around him. He stared at Hildir with an expressionless face.

“Please.”

“Very well. Then, I shall introduce the messenger-”

Hildir cut the soldier off.

“That will not be necessary, I know him well.”

Hildir stepped forward calmly, and the mercenaries made way for him. Lawrence could feel his determination from the second floor of the inn.

“Well met, Emanuel Yanerkin!”

The messenger on the horse smiled.

“I trust you are well, Mr. Hildir Schunard?”

Hildir put his hand on his right shoulder; it seemed Yanerkin was responsible for that wound.

“Shall we commence the negotiations at the council chambers?”

Milicky made the offer that the most powerful man in town should offer. Of course, the townspeople couldn't accept that because it meant sending Hildir behind closed doors with his enemies. They were already raising their voices.

“I have nothing to hide, so we might as well negotiate out in the open.”

Yanerk's words made it clear that he was hiding something, but he was doing his best to conceal it. He climbed off his horse, much to everyone's surprise.

“..What do you think, Mr. Schunard?”

Milicky was doing his best to maintain a neutral position. He turned his eyes to Hildir as he asked, but Hildir had been expecting this sort of outcome. It wasn't typical at all to negotiate in public, since council chambers were meant for such things. Such political dealings were not meant for public consumption, so this was less likely to be a compromise than a trap. Hildir's mind was surely filled with such thoughts, but he couldn't reveal them to their audience with Yanerk standing before him.

“..I am fine with that.”

Hildir paused only long enough to appear as dignified as possible. He had to maintain that image to be the people's righteous defender. His heart might be burning with desire to pursue his dream, but he had to keep that eagerness in check. Lawrence understood all of this; he was uniquely experienced when it came to how black and white merchants could be. It was beyond him whether anyone else in the audience knew that.

“Very well. Then let us begin.”

With Milicky's order, the soldiers dispersed the townsfolk with their spears to form a clearing in the center of the crowd. There were many people watching from the surrounding buildings as well. Lawrence didn't get a bad vibe from the proceedings so far; Hildir still seemed to hold the advantage.

The city was undoubtedly surrounded by Diva's army, and Hildir had been hoping to unite the north without the use of force. Now was the time to take all of his talk and figure out a way to make it a reality. And yet, despite Yanerk clearly being at a disadvantage, he seemed prepared. Milicky, too, seemed calm. It was Hildir who was nervous.

“What's their game?”

Lawrence murmured.

“I do not know. The rabbit should have the advantage.”

Holo felt the same way, but she still continued to calmly speak as she stared out the window.

“Still, that baron with the dark eyes told the rabbit that clever people struggle precisely because they are clever; if that happens now..”

Lawrence looked at what Holo was eyeing, and saw Yanerkin fire the first shot.

“We have been misunderstood!”

He spoke much more loudly than necessary to be talking to the people next to him, and he was gesticulating.

“We are not here to hurt anyone!”

This was so ridiculous that the crowd began to get riled up again. They could see the reality, so how could they trust him? Hildir was given an obvious opening.

“So you say! And yet, you have brought an army! You only plan to start with this town, and will not halt while you can profit! You plan to devour anything in your path, and not just food! The fact that you have an army is all the evidence we need to know your true motives!”

When people thought of the accountant for a big company, they thought of a person who lived their lives in a room full of numbers. But Hildir was nothing like that, and it made sense that he wasn't: Diva wasn't a large company when it began, and Hildir had been there right from its inception. He wasn't just a dreamer, he was an accomplished adventurer who dreamed big.

“That is precisely what is being misunderstood!”

Yanerkin quickly, but calmly insisted that their army was being misunderstood. What was he hoping to accomplish? The crowd didn't even bat an eye.

“Oh, we have misunderstood? Was the army just here to protect you?”

Everyone was cheering Hildir, since there could obviously be no misunderstanding about this. It was clearly Diva company's army, and no explanation was necessary as to their true intent. In fact, everyone was expecting a fight the moment their messenger arrived.

And yet.. Lawrence felt a chill run up his spine. Yanerkin's smile was terrible, like he had been waiting all this time for Hildir to say that. Misunderstanding.. protection.. fear.. Lawrence looked back out the window, remembering the pain he always felt when people did this. Damn. Milicky really *was* going to use this trick..

“Precisely!”

Yanerkin shouted loudly enough for Hildir to flinch. His game was tricky, but Lawrence had

finally figured it out. It had to do with the wooden crates on that horse's back. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Their goal was so obvious. Hildir had given him the very answer before: Diva didn't have the money to make this work! They read the same account books Hildir did, after all.

However, it was those account books that triggered a memory in Lawrence. Something about port cities, and Narwhales.. and something about a riot in the Winfield Kingdom. Accountants couldn't see everything. Even if the numbers didn't lie, they didn't have to tell the whole story.

Of course Hildir had considered Diva's ruse carefully, and that was why he was so confident that they didn't have the means to hide large amounts of money. But what if he was wrong? What if they had enough to pay everyone off? Milicky was right. Hildir was too damn clever; so clever that he couldn't even fathom how these idiots would try to trap him!

“We not here to harm anyone! You see, we had to protect ourselves, all because of this!”

Everyone gasped as Yanerkin's men opened the wooden crates. They were filled with silver coins. Trenni silver coins. All eight crates were filled to the brim - a *very* large amount of money.

“We're not philosophers! We're merchants! We get things done! We know how to make everyone happy, unlike the deceiver who is among you!”

Yanerkin shouted his accusation as he cast the coins into the crowd. They fell like snowflakes among the people.

“Oh! They're real!”

“Real silver coins!”

The crowd was quickly swept into a frenzy. It was only natural, of course, since most people had to work an entire month to earn but a single Trenni silver. They were drawn to it like flies, and Yanerkin continued to fling them even as he spoke.

“Please take them! Our company has gathered them for all of you!”

People had thrown down their weapons to pick the coins up off the ground.

“We're merchants! We never trade unless we're sure we'll make more! These silver coins are no different! We're giving them to you because we feel that helping you will help us in turn! If you doubt me, just pick one up for yourself! They're real!”

The crates were emptying as the coins were flung by Yanerkin and his men. Not a single weapon was still being held up; only coins. All hands were too busy with them to pick their weapons back up.

“Wait, please wait!”

Hildir's shout fell on deaf ears. Even the town's soldiers had no idea whether to stop everyone or join them in picking up the coins. Yanerkin could tell, and was already handing more out to them personally. Milicky just watched with his usual stoney expression. He had his own reasons. He knew the power of money better than most. That was why he knew Hildir's idealism couldn't stand up to it.

Hildir and Moid were trying to convince people one by one, but it was all for naught. Lawrence wanted to shout out at Yanerkin. He couldn't believe that he called himself a merchant when he dirtied that name with such underhanded tactics. Not even the ancient powers could stand up to the violent lust of money; especially not this much money.

Things like pride and righteousness meant nothing in the face of this. Even a wonderful dream like Hildir's would be easily crushed by such despicable tactics. A so-called merchant was working to destroy a merchant's utopia, by abusing the privilege that money afforded him.

The world couldn't be changed. Those were Milicky's words, but really it was that people couldn't be changed. That was the ugly truth being shown here. Hildir was only wasting his effort in trying to stop them.

Lawrence hit the windowsill and rose to his feet. He turned around and reached out for the pouch lying on the table. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” he thought, ready to use gold's might to crush silver's. The moment he tried to open the pouch, however, he was stopped by Holo.

“That is stupid!”

“Stupid?! Of *course* it's stupid! But can you really just watch this? Just watch them lose?!”

Lawrence obviously wasn't thinking about what would happen after he flung gold coins out of the window. He understood that. But there was no way he couldn't shout at this, let alone forgive it. He fought with Holo for the pouch, until several objects fell out onto the table beneath it. The account book Hildir had copied from memory. Cole's bag. A hammer with an image of the sun on it. A hammer meant to lead the world to glory.

“This is destiny.”

Holo spoke spitefully. Her voice was so hoarse it sounded like she had been crying for centuries.

“So many things cannot be changed..”

She was echoing Milicky, but even he had implied that powerful people could still run the world. If even she could do nothing but watch destiny take everything away from her..

Lawrence let go of the bag and fell back down. Holo stared at him sadly as the clamor outside continued. Hildir couldn't even be heard anymore.

“I know! Trust me, I've been doing my best to tolerate that!”

He wanted her to tell him what to do. He wasn't a powerful Wisewolf, so what *could* he do? Right now, all he could do was helplessly stare at her.

“Hey..”

She knelt down and pulled his head into her chest.

“I could not tolerate it without you. You are always there to hold my hand..”

She was talking into his ear, just like he had done to her.

“So if the world cannot be changed, then we can at least look out for ourselves. At least we can try to be happy.”

Lawrence wanted to speak, but couldn't. He would have to sigh and let this merchant dream die. Could he do that? Could he even stop them? Why, God, were the good people being forsaken? This cold-blooded, unchangeable world was just too harsh and cruel. Dreams were something one could only ever see in their minds and Lawrence's tears just wouldn't stop falling.

Hildir's hard work was right there on the ground in front of him. So was Cole's, who had gone to Kinisen for his own dreams. In the end, both dreams were worth the same amount. They would all collapse, just like that copy of Diva's account book, just like those useless certificates Cole had lugged around with him.

Cole had been robbed of everything and left with nothing but worthless paper. Diva's account book was destined for the same fate. Life was like a bag; no matter how much you mended it, a hole would always open so you would lose what you cherished. Cole would have to learn that lesson himself some day, now matter how cruel a lesson it was.

The dream that Hildir and Diva had was over. Who was left now who could change the world? Lawrence's eyes were fixated on the papers in front of him as it sank in that money was the only thing that could change people. It would always shine in their eyes and make them forget their own dreams.

Hildir was a man who lived to count money. He'd already given up a great deal for the sake of money, and now money was forcing him to give up what little he had left. Lawrence needed to vent. He kicked the papers with his good leg, wanting them to vanish from his sight, but they

simply flipped in the air right back to him.

“Damn it!”

He grabbed them to tear them to pieces.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, he stopped. He wasn't sure why, but it had something to do with the paper he held. A merchant's mind was always turning, and it was seeing one of Cole's certificates. One of the ones a young worker must have stolen from some company and sold to con artists to earn some coin. It was just a standard exchange certificate, completely worthless, but Lawrence's mind was suddenly completely occupied.

Exchanges. Exchange certificates. That was it! That was how Diva could have hidden their capital. It had to be! Would Hildir have noticed? Lawrence let go of Holo's hand and scrambled to find Hildir's account book. There it was! Had he considered this or not? Lawrence read through it at a breakneck pace: overstocking, faking trades, faking the cost of production.. he seemed to have considered everything..

..everything but exchange certificates.

They were the perfect tool for the traveler who couldn't risk hauling actual cash. Not when a simple certificate for that amount was enough to claim that amount at the end of their journey. But like any great advance, it provided certain loopholes. Most importantly, that the traveler never took the actual cash with them, so it remained safe in the company holding it for them.

Only the traveler and the certificate moved, and the cash stayed behind. Hildir had been careless. If he treated it for what it was, he wouldn't have missed this outcome. It had nothing to do with profit, it was simply about safety. It was easy to forget that while looking over account books all day.

In the end, the world could be changed with the vast amount of money that these exchange certificates could represent. That was in fact what had happened here. All the conversations that Lawrence had with boatmen and Cole about exchange certificates were coming back to him.

Everyone had been mystified by these strange certificates. They weren't being exchanged in Gerube, but were instead being forwarded directly to Lesco. If so, then Gerube was issuing useless certificates, so the actual amount of cash wasn't changing. That meant the branch that was paying would eventually run out of money, which was *precisely* what Lawrence had told Lou Loah to take advantage of in order to win the banned book.

But what about the other end of the order? Lesco's currency market was bizarre, with cheap

gold coins and expensive silver ones. Many people were taking advantage of this situation by taking exchange certificates from Diva that they bought for the gold coins, and exchanging them for silver in Gerube. It was just the natural thing to do; it was far too attractive a prospect to pass up. It also explained why Diva company in Lesco had so much coin.

Lawrence once again rose to his feet, completely ignoring Holo. Yanerkin was throwing those very coins right now. Hildir was still trying to convince the people to not accept them. Why was Lawrence staying silent? He had to act! He'd seen through Diva's little game, and knew the meaning behind this stunt that Yanerkin was pulling. Could he find a way to calm the people down? After all, their scheme was hardly something the people of the north would denounce.

But he *had* to do something. He had to find a flaw in their plan, something he could exploit that he hadn't thought of yet. He had to stab back at Yanerkin, using his own certificates against him. What was the answer to this riddle? Exchange certificates.. market differences.. market values of currency.. topics such as these were flitting through his mind, and the answer was right on the tip of his tongue..

He looked at Holo with pleading eyes, but she only stared back sadly. She was his responsibility now. He'd accepted that when they reunited, and told her he would end their adventure.. but here he was, making her so angry that all that was left was sadness. But he couldn't help his nature; he reached out for her shoulder, like a man begging to be saved.

“You..”

She swallowed the rest of her words and gave up, looking down at the ground. She only wanted to live a quiet life with him in a shop, not shoot for the stars. She didn't want to risk life on some ridiculously flimsy dream. Lawrence knew that, and wanted to give up. He desperately wanted to give up. He was just too damn stupid to do that without regretting it for the rest of his life.

Holo finally continued.

“Oh very well. Let us end this with a howl.”

“!”

Lawrence couldn't even breathe. Holo simply smiled back at him.

“I cannot just watch them lose, either..”

She placed her hand on his.

“You *will* pay me what you owe me, will you not?”

Of course he would. He would pay anything now that she had melted the ice that was freezing his heart.

“Then please do what only you can do.”

She smiled again at his response before placing her other hand on the windowsill. She then began sucking in air, even bending back to gather as much as she could. Her howl would be one to remember. It would be her screaming “all males are stupid!” in the language of wolves.

“AWWWWWOOOOOOOOO!!”

Even when they were in a walled town, those who lived near forests and mountains had to be wary of wolves. Everyone froze at Holo's howl as though a bucket of freezing water was pouring on them.

“Diva company's deceit cannot be hidden!”

Everyone looked up as Lawrence spoke.

“Diva company's deceit cannot be hidden!”

This time Hildir looked up as well, in a daze.

“Diva company's deceit cannot be hidden!”

Yanerkim finally responded when he heard Lawrence repeat himself a second time.

“What? What are you talking about? You'd better have evidence for your accusation!”

Of course.. evidence.. without that, Lawrence was just conjecturing. Having no real case, his mind suddenly went blank. He felt ready to vomit. When Holo smacked him with her tail, he looked back only to have the hair on his chin yanked.

“Where did your confidence go? Show them the evidence.”

Hearing that from the Wisewolf, Lawrence looked back outside and prominently displayed an exchange certificate.

“Here is an exchange certificate from Diva company! It is all the evidence we need!”

He was lying. Even if it was really Diva's certificate, it wasn't proper evidence. But it was still a highly effective accusation.

“What..!? How could that be evidence of anything?!”

Yanerkín's voice wavered ever so slightly. It seemed Lawrence wasn't incorrect after all. He breathed in deeply and roared as loudly as he could.

“They have issued these certificates for others, and are now throwing the money at you! But it's not their money, it's other people's deposits!!”

Hildir wasn't wrong; Diva was broke, and couldn't afford a war. They couldn't take over a town that had shut its gate to them. If they did, they would have trouble spreading their new currency. All they had was the money others had given them in exchange for certificates. It wasn't their money - they would have to repay it eventually.

But in the short term, they could still use that borrowed money. All the coins they were flinging now would have to be returned eventually. If Sovereign kept its gate shut, Diva wouldn't be able to repay their dues. Once their scheme was exposed, no one would trust the certificates they issued anymore. Their flow of capital would slowly grind to a halt.

“Just send a fast horse to Lesco to see for yourselves! There's no hurry here! Or would you rather take money from thieves?!”

Everyone lowered their head, then looked at one another. They were probably feeling ashamed about their eagerness to pick up the coins. Their self-esteem was shattered, so Lawrence had his chance to deliver the killing blow. But in the end, he couldn't. He was exhausted. His head was spinning. Yanerkín saw that, and smiled. This was it: if Lawrence couldn't speak up now, his attack would be parried.

“Liar! We couldn't use the deposits in this way! The Church would condemn us! Besides, the Church was the one who guaranteed these documents! We're trusted by the Church and the barons because we're righteous traders!”

Thankfully, Yanerkín's shameless attempt to leverage the Church's power was meaningless in the north. He was scared. Lawrence still had a chance..

“Then..!”

The moment Lawrence spoke, his vision blurred. He was badly wounded, and still had a fever, so it was no surprise that he would pass out. He'd over-extended himself. As he hyperventilated and stepped back, his eyes went dark. He knew what to say, but couldn't say it. In fact, he would probably fall to the ground. What could he do now? The moment he sighed, he saw what looked like an angel slap him in the face.

“Fool.”

He clutched the windowsill, remembering that he wasn't alone.

“You are not alone anymore.”

Two people could accomplish what one could not. He had access to that truth now, with Holo beside him.

“Tell me what to say.”

Her abruptness helped clear his mind. She could do it. She looked like a nun. In fact, she would be even more convincing than a merchant like him. He was collapsing, despite his efforts to remain standing, but for the first time in his life he actually felt safe in that kind of situation.

“..then I ask you this..”

“Then I ask you this!”

Her voice was tremendous. Even a girl's voice sounded more commanding than his. He wondered if that's why she was so happy right now, but didn't care: her voice was still his weapon to wield.

“..those coins you are throwing..”

“Those coins you are throwing!”

“..you plan to use them to create your own currency..”

“You plan to use them to create your own currency!”

Lawrence couldn't keep standing any longer, and put his weight on the wall as he slid down to the floor.

“But you have not told the Church that, have you? You have kept quiet because coins are just coins! They serve only one purpose to them!”

Holo continued to shout as Lawrence whispered to her. She would be a fine proprietress for their shop.

“Profit! The Church only cares about profit! You are using the Church's name to justify stealing! That is what this is! The Church will not look kindly on this! Your own sins will be your undoing!”

Holo wasn't just saying what Lawrence whispered to her; she had read Cole's bible and experienced much in her life. She knew exactly what words would have the most power, and perfectly delivered her sermon like a preacher. By the time she finished, she was panting. She had to calm herself and wipe the spit from her mouth. When she turned back to Lawrence, he was looking up at her.

“Wonderful..”

The crowd was up in arms. Lawrence couldn't see anything, but he could tell that Yanerkin was looking around nervously.

“Shut up! Those are lies! Trust me, we'll be able to pay it all back!”

He was so nervous he couldn't even tell what to say anymore. When Holo helped Lawrence back to his feet, he watched Yanerkin fight to salvage the situation, looking around at the people who were stepping back from him and his coins. His trembling hands were still flinging more coins out, but only met the same kind of stares that a bird would shoot back if a pebble was tossed to it: only briefly interested, but not reaching out to take it.

Lawrence and Holo had succeeded. They had bested those who shamelessly tried to win the people over with money. Hildir looked at Lawrence, and their eyes met for a moment before Lawrence looked back at the crowd.

“Now you see how righteous they really are! Close the gate before their army advances!”

Hildir's voice wasn't ignored this time. Even the frightened soldiers loved their town enough to know what they had to do. Everyone was finally working together to prepare for a possible attack. Yanerkin walked over to Hildir in a terrified stupor.

“Don't do this! It's stupid! I'll be killed if you close the gate!”

Yanerkin was down to begging. In that instant, any anger one might have for him would evaporate; he had clearly not realized that he was gambling with his own life.



Yankerkin was grabbing Hildir's clothes, but Hildir didn't react. Moid finally pulled him away. Hildir's silence was practically like a death sentence for Yanerkin, who gave up and stared at the ground in defeat.

Hildir then stared at Milicky, who was watching the people from the back of his horse. He wasn't wrong, but he wasn't right either. People weren't quite as stupid as he thought, even if they weren't especially smart. When Milicky noticed Hildir's stare, he stared back. He then called for his soldiers to retreat, and Moid released Yanerkin to follow them.

It seemed everything was over. Hildir and Moid looked up at Lawrence and greeted him. Lawrence stared back, leaning on Holo for support, then waved at them. Moid then called for his men to head back into the inn, and Hildir joined them. Lawrence felt a great weight removed from his shoulders, and stole a glance at Holo before his vision blurred.

He wasn't sure what happened next, because the next thing he saw was the ceiling. Ah, he had fainted.. that must be Holo sitting on his chest, and that must be her tail brushing his face.

“Now if you can finally just open a shop, maybe my dream can come true..”

She was staring at him with a tired look, her elbows on her knees. Lawrence knew he had promised her to be responsible and end this adventure. He took her hand, knowing he'd have to make up for this. He'd have to work extra hard to become trustworthy again after today, and if she ever left him it was just what he deserved.

She knew how hard-headed this fool was, but she still helped him. He still wanted to explain himself to her, and show her why he had to do it. Things worked out, didn't they? Of course, by the time he realized his face was betraying those thoughts, her tail swatted him.

“You truly cannot learn from your mistakes. Such a typical male.”

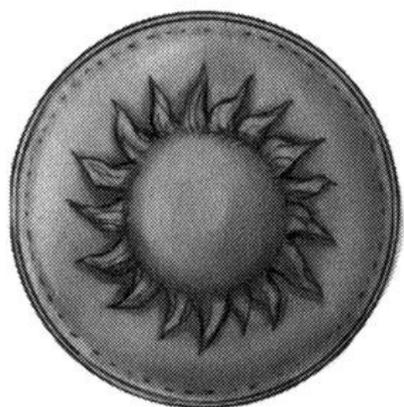
“But you do still love me, right?”

Holo was left speechless. She could only give up and turn away. It seemed like she was still trying to work off the rest of the rage she had used a moment ago to win the crowd over. Her tail trembled for a moment, then she sighed.

"Damnation. The truth is so vexing."

Of course, when she turned back to him there was a smile on her face.

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## Chapter 12

Two of the Myuri mercenaries fearlessly dragged Yanerkin (who looked like a man waiting to die) and his group back out of town. As they headed out toward the thousands of encamped soldiers, Hildir went to see Milicky about their ultimate response to Diva. Holo seemed confused; what was there to talk about? But Sovereign was an important place, a hub of sorts for the north, so Hildir was doing what he felt was necessary.

It might have been fine to just thwart Yanerkin's plan and have the townsfolk close their gate, since Diva would have no choice but to retreat. And yet, this wouldn't solve all of the remaining problems. Milicky was still in control of Sovereign, after all, and so Hildir had to build a rapport with him. This was his town in the end, so if he wasn't appeased he might just burn the inn to the ground, taking Hildir and the others with it.

Hildir had to resolve the remaining issues, namely that if he ever regained his position in the Diva company he would become a threat to Milicky and Sovereign again. Milicky wasn't exactly a bad ruler, he just had his own set of beliefs. Diva wanted to build trust between them, so Hildir had to show his sincerity by adjourning to discuss things with Milicky.

Of course, that didn't mean anyone believed he would actually be able to do that on his own. Even if Hildir could promise Diva would stay out of Sovereign's affairs, Milicky wouldn't find that a good enough offer. Lawrence couldn't help but be nervous in spite of Hildir's confidence. In fact, Lawrence was getting quite antsy that Milicky was going to kill Hildir out of rash anger.

Later that evening, however, Hildir returned. Everyone finally relaxed for a while before they began inevitably asking Hildir what had happened. Apparently, after having dinner they discussed the situation and came to a startlingly quick agreement.

Hildir was quite satisfied by everyone's shocked reaction as he reported what that agreement was. It turned out that he had offered to make Sovereign a second mint for issuing Diva's new currency. Of course that might cause further problems related to the profits that said currency would bring, so Hildir couldn't just leave his explanation at that.

"The great furnace in this town hasn't been used for years. Now it will finally be re-lit."

In fact there were barely any active furnaces in Sovereign. Diva had started off as an ore hauling firm, and Sovereign as a refinery, but Milicky had banned all such activity to keep Sovereign safe. That was what made them the independent town they were. Milicky's subsequent efforts had kept Sovereign from becoming just another dot on the northern map, and now he was coming full circle and accepting Hildir's proposal to rekindle their great furnace.

"Alright then! Let's do this! After all, we're the hard workers here! Hey, you guys! Let's get

going!”

Sovereign’s furnace was presently repurposed as a depot for the amber and fur trades. Myuri leaned on his cane as he stood next to it. He felt he had to make it up to Hildir and Lawrence for having slept through all of their trials, so he was the one shouting out now.

Knowing he would regret it later, Moid had asked Lawrence and Hildir to help find something for him to do, something important that would salvage his reputation. Hildir gave Myuri command of the furnace's restoration. The townsfolk also joined in, wanting to help out after all of their earlier mistakes, so the Myuri mercenaries were suddenly back in the limelight busily helping out where it counted.

“They'll be gone until tomorrow morning at the earliest.”

Messengers had been sent to discuss matters with Diva, but wouldn't be able to bring any news until midnight. The final results of the negotiations wouldn't be known until dawn. Lawrence was still suspicious about the whole thing, but Hildir was his usual optimistic self.

“Come now, we’ll be fine.”

“You're pretty amazing. How'd you even think of this?”

Lawrence was also standing near the entrance of the furnace-turned-depot.

“I mean, you told me you'd solve things with money, but this is way beyond my expectations.”

Workers were inspecting every inch of the furnace, and Lawrence could only watch them and talk with Hildir. Hildir simply smiled, like any great merchant should. Lawrence couldn't bring himself to point that out so he just swallowed his pride and kept talking.

“Using that hammer to re-mint every Lumione coin in the world.. that's just not something a normal person could come up with.”

That was basically what Hildir had in mind. Lumione coins were the most pure gold coins around. They wouldn't lose their value if they were re-minted. All that would effectively change was the image minted onto them, but now it would be the image that Diva company had chosen. Diva already had copper and silver coins that were popular, but not gold ones.

Gold coins were simply too expensive and it was impossibly difficult to challenge the Lumione's popularity and trust. Diva also didn't have the ability to mint enough coins to really compete with the Lumione, so having Sovereign do it for them was a masterstroke. They couldn't issue so many that Diva company would be undercut, but the symbolic importance of this event was vital and Diva no longer had to mint more coins than they could afford.

Hildir's decision, to found a mint here and pay the town when their coins were issued, was unprecedented. Even if Hildir became Diva's leader, he couldn't be the same threat to Sovereign he would have been otherwise. If Diva abused their power, then Sovereign and the northern barons would never trust them again. Hildir had essentially founded a long-term peace between them. Milicky surely realized how much of a concession that was.

"I couldn't have done it without the rest of you."

Hildir, Myuri, Lawrence, and Holo were all pivotal players in this, and it wouldn't have worked out otherwise.

"Lawrence."

Hildir spoke up after a brief moment of silence.

"Yes?"

Lawrence looked up to see Hildir watching Myuri direct the hard-working mercenaries. He was talking to Lawrence as he surveyed everyone else.

"Won't you join us?"

Hildir turned to face him, and Lawrence knew what his offer meant. His was the largest of the mining firms, and one that had the clout to create a new system of currency in the whole of the north. Such an invitation from such an impressive merchant was even more rewarding than starting his own shop. However, this time Lawrence's head turned to face Myuri, with Hildir left looking at him. It *was* an incredible offer, the kind a traveling peddler couldn't even dream of.

"And if I accept, I'll be able to chase my dreams as I will, yes?"

"Of course. I guarantee it."

Hildir made it clear that he had already decided this, so Lawrence didn't hesitate to give his response.

"That's why I can't do it."

He smiled and continued.

"The more we talk about it, the more I'll be tempted by it. So I'm afraid I'll have to politely decline."

Hildir didn't need him to spell it out; he was already staring at Lawrence. He knew he couldn't win this time, so he just turned back to watch Myuri again.

“I see.”

And yet, Hildir couldn't resist cracking a joke.

“If I knew this would all happen, I would have become a pretty young girl as well.”

Lawrence couldn't contain his laughter, and had to clutch his cane so he wouldn't collapse on the ground.

“If you had, Holo would have eaten you!”

“..I *am* a rabbit, after all.”

Hildir smiled.

“What a pity.. Hey, where are you going?”

“Back to the inn. It's not like I can help get this furnace going again, so I'll just be in the way.”

Hildir's voice practically dripped with sincerity now.

“Not at all! We were all just as hurt, and *you're* the one who put that Yanerkin in his place. Besides, if it hadn't been for you, then Myuri-”

Lawrence raised his hand with a tired smile, and Hildir paused. Lawrence knew what he was going to say, and he too wanted to stay and watch the gold coins being minted. But he wouldn't do it this time. The scales of his heart tilted far too easily, so this was one feast he couldn't attend.

“If I don't leave now, I never will.”

Hildir wanted to speak up and convince Lawrence to stay, but he had long since understood Lawrence's relationship with Holo. The danger wasn't over now for Lawrence, and it was Hildir who had asked Holo to flee with Lawrence. This was Lawrence's first actual chance to make good on that and flee. Hildir could tell that was what he was talking about, so he begrudgingly let Lawrence leave with a nod.

“I understand. Then I'll just make sure you're informed when the coins are minted.”

“Thank you.”

With that, Lawrence finally left the furnace. It was so hot inside that all those busy workers were drenched with sweat. Being caught up in that sweltering atmosphere made Lawrence feel a tinge of pain when the cold night air hit his skin. He could have stayed and reveled in the victory celebration they had earned for winning such a crazy bet, but that wasn't where he

belonged.

He slowly trudged on until he noticed someone walking toward him and the furnace. For just a split second, he wondered who would be coming to the party so late, when he realized it was Holo.. carrying a large bottle of wine.

“Oh, where are you going?”

“I should be the one asking you that!”

She wagged the bottle.

“I was given wine, and wanted to drink it with you, so I came.”

“I felt like I was in the way there, so I decided to go back to the inn.”

He smiled at Holo's nagging.

“Good thinking.”

She looked like a wife coming down on her drunken husband by banning him from going to the pub. He knew he deserved this kind of treatment for his many mistakes, so he didn't dare look her in the eyes. Instead, he tried to change the topic.

“You say you were given this wine? By whom?”

“Whom? What was his name again? You know, that stupid guy.”

It seemed that Holo was back to not remembering people's names.

“Milicky?”

She nodded.

“But why would he send us wine..”

Holo looked entirely unhappy now.

“What do you mean? Are you saying he poisoned it?”

“Well, no..”

Lawrence had until now been unable to understand Milicky's thought process. He had that strange “half human, half beast” quality that Holo also had. Lawrence didn't exactly find him suspicious, but he didn't trust him either. Holo, on the other hand, seemed to have figured him

out right from the start. She was staring at Lawrence.

“There are many things you have missed lately. Everyone has a side they do not show, yes?”

Holo was right, but.. what exactly had Lawrence missed?

“It was during our second chat with Hildir.. oh, that is right.. you were not there..”

Back then Holo had left their room so she could “tidy her tail,” and came back rather annoyed. So something *had* happened..

“I have been doing my best to be nice.”

“Nice?”

“I have been treating this as.. well, a lesson.”

Holo was murmuring now.

“That stupid guy has been watching over a grave, you see.”

“A.. grave?”

“Well, I do not know exactly what happened, but I have heard that his companion, a human, died some decades ago. Since this was her home he lay her to rest here, hoping that she could find peace here even though he was not able to save her, blah blah blah. Jeez, could he not have thought of something more meaningful than that?”

Holo was speaking in a playful tone, but her face might as well have been made of stone. It was obvious that this was an issue dear to her heart.

“Then, you-”

“Seeing me hold your hand so tightly before his eyes must have been a reminder of his past.”

Surely she meant that Milicky was both happy for Holo and jealous of her at the same time. That would explain why he had acted the way he did.

“Then he sent the rabbit out to ask me to speak with him. So I went.”

Lawrence was going to end up like Milicky's wife. He would grow old, infirm, and ultimately die. It was unavoidable, and Holo knew that. She had been left behind before, so of course she would be worried. But Lawrence still held her hand, and she was willing to let him. What could she have told Milicky, a man who had been watching over his wife's grave all of this time? Holo calmly continued.

“I told him, ‘just go find another companion as soon as possible, fool.’”

“..”

Lawrence stopped dead in his tracks as Holo walked on ahead of him. She soon stopped and looked back at him with a grin on her face.

“You truly are adorable.”

She giggled and continued walking, and Lawrence had to admit that he didn't want her to be sad after he died. He couldn't help but wish that didn't mean another would be at her side, but at least he was the one stepping forward to be at her side right now.

“And yet, if we had not met I would still be in that field, and you would still be driving around working for your future family.”

Her impetuous tone was matched by the way she angrily opened the door to their inn. She didn't hold the door open for him either, of course. He had to lean into his cane and find the doorknob in the dark, then clumsily force the door open and stumble indoors.

“And of course, you would be carrying that wine right now..”

It was silent in the inn; everyone was probably out working on the furnace. Lawrence had to feel his way around while Holo briskly stepped ahead of him.

“..but I wouldn't be here talking to you.”

Holo stopped. She wasn't making any noise, but he could tell she was smiling at him. A moment later, her light footsteps continued up the stairs. He did his best to keep up with her, but by the time they were at the fourth floor he was panting for dear life.

“You said you would not be here talking to me, but you are not talking anyhow. Fool!”

Her shout almost made him fall back downstairs, but she grabbed him and pulled him up. He was scared out of his wits, especially since she was laughing.

“Now you know how scary it is.”

“..?”

He just stared blankly at her, or rather at the outline of her face that was all he could see. Her words were just as vague to him as her appearance was right now.

“Alright, we are here.”

Holo flung open the shutters in their room, and everything lit up. Well, not really, but Lawrence was still able to find his way to the bed under the dim moonlight. He was finally able to sit down and catch his breath. When he'd calmed down a bit, he finally noticed that Holo was right in front of him. However, he didn't get the chance to ask her for a cup of water. He looked up to see a face of genuine anger.

“Hey.”

Her voice was ice cold but her eyes were red hot. He could see the moonlight reflecting on her eyes.

“Did you not tell me you would never put yourself in danger again?”

This again? But he hadn't *put* himself in danger! He was ready to run, and was put into risk this time! When she saw the pained look on his face, Holo hummed and drew close to him.

“Alright.. I know that you did not choose it this time.”

He wanted to nod in agreement, but her sharp glare stopped him.

“But you still broke your promise regardless. Now I know how you will respond if this sort of thing happens again, but I cannot promise I will be there every time. You had best remember that, or you will come to harm.”

He couldn't tell if she just wanted to vent or was sincerely warning him, so he settled on both.

“I mean, how can I trust you after this..?”

He badly wanted to tell her about how he'd rejected Hildir's offer a few minutes ago.. but it was pointless. Words alone wouldn't mean anything. This was hardly the first time she'd blamed him for such a thing. He looked up at her like a shamed criminal begging for forgiveness.

“I know, I know.. you are just a selfless fool.. and you are not really wrong in what you do.”

“..?”

Lawrence's head tilted ever so slightly as he tried to figure out where she was going. She raised her voice every so slightly in response.

“That is why I suspect you will at least honor a contract, even if you cannot honor your promises.”

“Huh?”

His questioning tone earned him a smack in the face, but her hand stopped and rubbed his face before turning his head to face her.

“Even that stupid church girl knows..”

Holo's fangs were on full threat display. Lawrence was already jumping back to what happened when they were retrieving the banned book in the snow. Elsa must have said something to Holo, but what would it have to do with the present situation?

He was so anxious that Holo couldn't resist toying with him some more. She moved her hands to take his head as though she was going to eat him. With Holo, one could never really tell if she would finally do it, but this time she only ended up staring into his eyes.

“..that witnesses must be present for a contract to be formed. She even told me so.”

Obviously the word “contract” meant something very different when it came from the mouth of someone like Elsa, who had grown up with the Church, then when it came from Lawrence's mouth.

“Wha..?”

Now Holo was really annoyed, but Lawrence was doing it on purpose. He knew what kind of contract she meant. He nodded to make that clear, and even though she eyed him doubtfully her shoulders eventually relaxed. After sighing, she smiled out of embarrassment. Once more she moved her face closer to his, and he marvelled at how silky her skin looked in the moonlight.

Only humans made that kind of contract in God's presence, he thought, so perhaps wolves preferred to do it in the moon's presence? He held her waist, and she offered no resistance. Her head tilted forward, spilling her hair onto his shoulder. He felt the time was right, so he closed his eyes. After moving his head forward for what felt like an eternity, he finally felt contact.. with her index finger.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot..”

He opened his eyes to see Holo standing up beside him again.

“Oh come on..”

He tried taking her hand, but she softly evaded him. His instinct to stand and give chase only lasted as long as it took for the pain in his leg to force him back down. He shot her a betrayed stare.

“Oh, do not look at me like that.”

Of course, that was just her way of hiding the fact that she wanted to see that look on his face. “So malicious,” he thought, but as usual he couldn't bear to complain when he saw the look in her eyes.

It wasn't surprising that she would be jealous of how effortlessly his heart was caught by dreams of a merchant utopia. She'd made that abundantly clear, but he never really learned his lesson. He knew all he could do was sit on the bed like an angry dog being scolded by its master, and Holo placed her hands on her hips when she saw that.

“Hmph. Indeed, I nearly forgot that when a new contract is made, the old one must be resolved.”

“What old one?”

Holo laughed at his confusion.

“The one where you promised to take me home to Yoitsu!”

“Ah.. right..”

How could he tell her he'd forgotten all about that already? In a twist of fate, they were once again forming a contract under the moonlight. The last time, it was between a lonely Wisewolf wishing to go home and a merchant who wished to earn enough money to find himself a home. It was quite a remarkable coincidence. As he looked at her, her expression softened until she looked up at the moon. She was trying to conceal her embarrassment.

“I still remember, you know.”

“Hmm?”

She turned back to him with a smile.

“How important it was for you to see that your companion made it home.”

He remembered saying that, but their trip had been so strange that he couldn't remember when. All he knew was that it made him happy that she remembered. It confirmed that she was thinking of him just as much as he was thinking of her. She laughed, and he joined in before sighing.

“Yoitsu.. Yoitsu..”

“That *is* your home, isn't it?”

“It is, but..”

“Hmm?”

He turned to face her, and couldn't resist taking a shot of his own.

“Care for a drink while you figure that one out?”

He lifted the bottle of wine from Milicky and waggled it just like she had earlier. After all, she wanted to drink with him, didn't she?

“Hmm.. very well. I do not have to trust you to know that you would not dare to do anything to me when I am drunk.”

At this point she could say whatever she wanted; he didn't feel like arguing anymore. She took the bottle from his hand and picked up a glass that was on the bed. At first he was confused as to why there was only one glass, but the moment his eyes began searching for another she knocked him on the head.

“You really are stupid.”

Her tail was wagging in utter joy as she continued.

“T'would seem that you are already drunk.”

“Perhaps, but it seems like someone already beat me to it.”

“Fool!”

She popped the cork and filled the glass as Lawrence held it. Just then, under the moonlight, they heard a loud mechanical noise outside. It sounded like the furnace had finally been restored, and everyone was stepping on the tremendous bellows to fan its first flames.

The northern winters were so long, but now they would have a golden sun as their currency. Myuri had once mentioned how much he loved seeing the sun rise after marching all night, and now a new age was being heralded by coins that had that very image imprinted on them.

And yet here was Lawrence, in his room at the inn, giving up on seeing the first coin being minted, with no trace of regret. He held that wine glass until it was poured, then lifted it up to see the moonlight reflecting through it.. but what he was really looking at was Holo's smile.

“Oh ho..”

It was the smile of his lover, a smile brighter than the sun and worth more than any golden coins.

