

SPICE & WOLF

VOL. 5

ISUNA HASEKURA


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By Isuna Hasekura

Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




Immediately thereafter, it was Holo who, impressed, uttered a quiet "huh." Lawrence was even more impressed and could find no words at all.
"My, what a delightful reaction! Melta, look; they are impressed!"
The nun called Melta smiled her clear, bell-like smile at the young, forceful voice that echoed throughout the room.


Arold murmured. "Been thinking it's about time for a pilgrimage."
A trip like that wouldn't be much different than looking for a place to bury his old bones.
"So, that's how it is," said Eve, pulling Lawrence's gaze to her. "Want to lend me some coin?"
—Eve Bolan, the merchant at the inn
—Arold Ecklund, the innkeeper


HOLO ONCE AGAIN LEANED AGAINST HIS CHEST, COMPLETELY STILL.
"CAN WE NOT END OUR TRAVELS HERE?" SHE MURMURED.

Contents

Prologue ——— 1

Chapter One ——— 5

Chapter Two ——— 43

Chapter Three ——— 129

Chapter Four ——— 205

Epilogue ——— 239





VOLUME V

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ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation: Paul Starr

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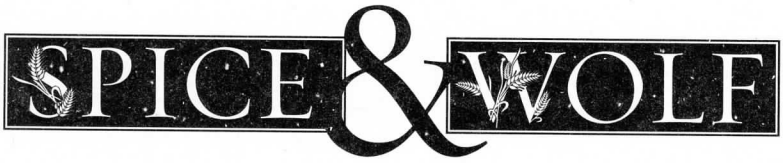
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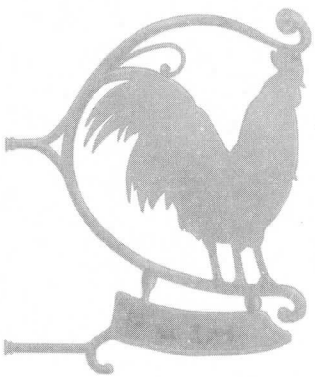
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SPICE & WOLF

PROLOGUE



It was a quiet journey.

There was no conversation—only the clattering of the wagon.

They woke, they rattled around in the wagon, they ate—only that.

Kraft Lawrence sat in the driver's seat, gripping the reins. It was his seventh year as a traveling merchant since setting out at the age of eighteen.

Loneliness was the constant companion of the traveling merchant, and he'd often found himself talking to his cart horse. There had been a time when these episodes were frequent. These last few days his quiet travels had continued, and he'd spoken no words worthy of the term.

Yet if asked if he was lonely, Lawrence's reply would have been negative, which was unmistakably thanks to his companion, who sat next to him in the driver's box.

Though she now had a blanket wrapped around herself so thoroughly that it was hard to tell if she was a boy or a girl, the beauty of her features would turn any head, and her long, chestnut-brown hair, fine enough to be the pride of any nobleman's daughter, easily holding the attention of male passersby.

If she stayed quiet and polite, surely she could have entered the grandest of functions without so much as a hint of shame—yet there was a reason things were not so simple for Lawrence's companion.

After all, she had the beast ears and tail that marked her as an evildoer.

His companion's name was Holo.

Her true form was that of a giant wolf so great it could swallow a human in one bite. She was the wolf-god of the harvest, who dwelled within the wheat.

"..."

For a moment, Lawrence wondered if Holo had said something, but perhaps she had simply opened her eyes. Her reasons for doing so were generally obvious.

She had shifted her tail a moment ago, so next it would be her ears. With a deerskin-gloved hand, Lawrence took hold of Holo's hood, pulling it slightly up off her head.

Through his gloved hand, he could feel her shift her wolf ears beneath the hood to a new, more comfortable position. The twitching motion continued for a moment, then stopped. After a period of minute adjustments, she seemed to be satisfied. This called to mind for Lawrence a fastidious noblewoman carefully arranging a flower in a vase until it was just so. Holo sighed softly, then nuzzled her hooded, blanketed head lightly against Lawrence.

Perhaps it was her way of expressing her thanks.

Lawrence returned his gaze to the road, and the quiet journey continued.

They no longer failed to understand each other.

Even without words, their travels were no longer lonely.

CHAPTER ONE



It had been a week since the incidents in the village of Tereo, where they'd very nearly been executed as criminals.

Lawrence and Holo now made for Lenos, a town where tales of Holo's exploits in the distant past were said to still exist.

Lenos was a largish town for the northlands known for its lumber and furs.

It received its share of visitors, so Lawrence and Holo passed many other merchants who came and went on the road to the town. Lawrence himself had visited it many times in the past, though this time he did not come for business.

He instead sought information about the ancient home of his companion.

Thus his wagon bed held none of the trade goods that usually filled it.

Lawrence had originally planned to sell some of the mountains of cookies the villagers of Tereo had given him as thanks, but they had all been eaten by the wolf who now slept next to him. If there was something tasty to eat, she would devour as much of it as was there, becoming angry when there was no more to be had.

She ate, drank, and slept a truly stunning amount.

Lawrence had to admit, though, that between the cold and the boredom, he would fall asleep, too, if he didn't have to hold the reins. In any case, her ability to sleep all night after drowsing all day was impressive. More than once he wondered if she was waking in the wee hours to sneak off and howl at the moon.

They had journeyed thus uneventfully for a week before the rain came.

Holo somehow contrived to predict the bad weather's arrival two days in advance, so perhaps it was that memory or perhaps it was the falling rain... Either way, she stirred beneath the blanket and gave Lawrence a wordless, resentful glare.

Lawrence turned away. No matter how accusatory her gaze, it was not as if he could do anything about the rain.

It had been falling steadily since midday—not in big drops but rather in thin, misty sheets—which was nice enough as far as that went, but given the cold, it was hardly different from being sprinkled with ice shavings.

Lawrence's hands had immediately gone numb, and just as he was beginning to ponder the possibility of hiding himself beneath the wagon bed, some god evidently noticed his good behavior.

Holo, too, noticed and popped her head out from underneath the blanket.

She yawned hugely. "...At this rate, it looks like we'll make it through without being frozen."

"That's easy for you to say bundled up in that blanket while I shiver away here, reins in hand."

"Hmph. 'Tis my cold heart. It needs must be kept warm," she said with a grin.

Lawrence found himself unable to be angry.

Ahead of them on the road stood their destination, a dark shadow that loomed in the otherwise pale white scenery.

"There 'tis. Like a piece of burnt rice floating in stew," said Holo,

her empty stomach making a ridiculous growling noise. Evidently, even this displeased wisewolf had not expected her stomach to growl at such an inopportune moment. After a stunned moment, she smiled sweetly, having forgotten her teasing entirely.

Lenos was a large port town built alongside the broad, slow Roam River, which meant that if they could see the town, the river should likewise be visible. At the moment, though, it was blurred from sight by the falling mist. Had it been clear, they would no doubt have seen the many boats that plied the river's surface.

Upon entering the town, it was clear that there were many boats tied up at their moorings in addition to the constant traffic on the river. Holo's beloved food stalls were abundant as was strong liquor.

If the coming winter's snow was going to delay their progress, they would at least make certain to enjoy their time here.

Lawrence did have one worry, though.

"There's something I should say, just to make sure you understand."

"Mm?"

"I know you visited this place long ago, but you may have forgotten, so I'll say it again: Lenos is a town of lumber and fur."

"Quite."

It was admittedly rather late to be bringing this up, but the treatment he could reasonably give her still depended on whether or not he'd made this point clear.

"Will you be angry if some of those furs are wolf pelts?"

Holo's expression was maddeningly ambiguous as she pulled at her collar, unwrapping the fox fur muffler that she wore.

It was a gift from Amati, the youth who had courted her in the town of Kumersun.

There was nothing inherently wrong about her wearing it, and the muffler was admittedly very useful in the cold weather, so

Lawrence had kept silent. Seeing it now, however, made him shift uncomfortably.

No doubt aware of this, Holo wore the muffler in an especially warm-looking fashion, but she now removed it and pointed the fox's head at Lawrence. "I've eaten mice, me, and been eaten by wolves!" she squeaked, her voice changing in a mockery of what he supposed was a fox.

Lawrence sighed.

He was up against Holo the Wisewolf.

"Hmph," Holo continued. "There is the hunter, and the hunted. And besides, you humans do far worse things. Do you not even buy and sell your fellow man?"

"This is true. The slave trade is both necessary and very profitable."

"Just as you can accept that as the custom of your world, we can be calm toward those who are hunted. And besides, what if the position was switched?" Holo narrowed her red-brown eyes.

Lawrence thought back to the exchange he'd had with Holo not long after they'd met—when she'd said that a wolf's cleverness came from devouring humans.

Even Lawrence felt that if a traveler strayed into wolf territory and failed to escape, the blame lay with the traveler. It was one thing to fear wolves, but actually hating them for this was a mistake, he felt.

This much was obvious to Lawrence.

"Still, I suppose seeing one's fellows hunted before one's very eyes is hardly an easy thing," said Holo.

Lawrence nodded his understanding.

Holo continued. "And you were nice enough to get flustered when I was hunted by another man," she said coyly, her mood now totally different from the state she had been in a few moments ago.

"Ah, yes, I certainly did," said Lawrence perfunctorily, returning his gaze to the cart horse ahead of him.

"Whence this uncaring affect?"

"Well...," began Lawrence, his eyes fixed steadily ahead. "It's embarrassing."

It is a wholly embarrassing admission, Lawrence thought to himself.

But to the wolf who sat beside him, such morsels were a delicacy, so it could hardly be helped.

Holo laughed hard enough that in the cold air, the white fog of her exhalations blurred her face. "Embarrassing, eh?"

"Entirely."

Conversation tended to naturally die down in the cold monotony of the long journey. Though knowing each other's dispositions as well as they did meant wordless exchanges could set Lawrence's mind at ease, they were still no substitute for real conversation like this. The two laughed at each other. The cart horse flicked its tail, as if to say, "Enough!" which only triggered another wave of laughter from its passengers.

Holo rewrapped the fox fur muffler around her neck as she giggled while Lawrence turned his gaze back to the panorama of Lenos that now came into focus.

It might have been twice the size of the pagan town of Kumersun. Surrounded by walls constructed perhaps a century earlier, the houses within the walls had long since filled the enclosed area. With no more room to build outward, buildings instead became more concentrated—and taller, always taller.

The scene spread out now before Lawrence made it look for a moment as though the town had finally overflowed its own walls. Dozens of tents flanked the road on both sides as they made their way to Lenos through the misting rain.

"Is this what they call a gate-front town, then?" asked Holo.

"That sort of thing happens around churches, yes, especially when the church has been plopped in the middle of the wilderness somewhere. It would be strange, though, to be constantly setting up shop outside the town walls."

For a town to prosper, it had to collect taxes, and to collect those taxes, it had to make people pass through its gates.

Of course, there were cramped towns that held their markets outside of the town, but even those were enclosed by temporary fences.

"Hmm. It hardly seems as though these people are engaging in trade."

Just as Holo said this, they drew closer to the tents and could see that the people beneath them wore traveling clothes and were busy cooking or chatting. And though they all wore traveling garments, the styles were from far and wide. Some seemed to be from even farther north than here while others were from the west or the south. At quick count, there seemed to be around twenty tents, each sheltering perhaps three or four people.

The one commonality was that they all seemed to be merchants who specialized in this or that commodity. Roughly half of them seemed to be hauling large loads with a few wagons even carrying giant barrels.

All the merchants' faces were tinged with dust and travel fatigue, and the occasional flash of irritation showed in their eyes.

Lawrence wondered if there'd been some kind of a coup in Lenos, but that didn't make sense given that only some of the people gathered there seemed to be quartered in tents. There were also farmers with donkeys in tow and merchantlike people carrying loads on their backs, all hurrying toward Lenos to get out of the rain or setting out toward any number of other destinations.

As far as Lawrence could tell, the town seemed more or less as it always had.

"Some kind of trouble *again*, perhaps?" mused Holo, emphasizing the "again" and grinning beneath her hood.

Lawrence glanced at Holo out of the corner of his eye, as if to ask, "And precisely whose fault has that been?" but she simply shot the same look back at him.

"It may be true that since meeting me you've had a few scrapes, but one can hardly claim that they were directly my fault."

"I—"

"I will grant the first one—well, part of that might have been owing to me, but its true cause was your avarice, which was wholly to blame for the next disaster. And our last problem was simple bad luck. Am I wrong?"

Holo was nothing if not precise.

Lawrence stroked his beard, which was longer of late, given his reluctance to shave without hot water, but still he did not give in and agree with her. "I suppose I understand what you're saying..."

"Mm."

"But I simply cannot agree. It's true that you weren't necessarily there to trigger our troubles, but..."

Lawrence couldn't bring himself to agree with Holo's assessment.

He wanted to tell her that it was her fault.

As his grumble trailed off, Holo gave him a look as if she couldn't even believe they were having the conversation. "I can see all too clearly how you don't want to agree with me, even though I am hardly the root cause of all these troubles."

Lawrence knitted his brows, wondering what trickery she was up to. She noted this and giggled.

Holo continued. "'Tis because you always use me as the basis for your actions—hence you always feel I'm pulling you this way and that."

Lawrence's left eyebrow twitched involuntarily.

She was right.

But admitting it would mean the wolf had gotten the best of him.

In other words—

"Heh. Always stubborn," said Holo, her voice as grating as the chill mist that fell from the sky.

Her smile was every bit as pure and fickle and cold as though she was about to run away forever.

He had to catch her.

In defiance of all reason, Holo's smile made him want to shout out loud.

The next moment, her small body would be in his arms.

It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"Mmph."

The urge lasted no more than four of the cart horse's steps.

Lawrence managed to keep his cool as he guided the wagon into the line for the checkpoint into town.

The reason for his restraint was simple.

There was a crowd of people around them.

As they plied their trade routes, traveling merchants loved to gossip, even about their own ilk. If Lawrence was seen openly flirting with his companion, no doubt the tale would spread.

Holo looked aside, seeming bored.

No doubt she was bored.

Despite the fact that Lawrence had always perceived all women's smiles to be the same, he could now follow the slightest changes of expression on Holo's face. In addition to her boredom, there was a flicker of unease.

He saw this and realized something. There were two basic motivations for his actions.

One was Holo.

The other was business.

Holo feared loneliness even more than Lawrence did. No doubt

she was sometimes frightened by the prospect of being weighed against business. In the end, only the gods could know which way the balance would tip in the end—or how close it might be.

And the end of their journey was not far away.

Would she venture to cause trouble just when Lawrence had to put on his merchant face, just to test which way he would choose, forcing the issue of whether she was more important than his ledger's balance?

Not that she was so insignificant as to warrant that kind of worry, Lawrence found himself thinking.

The wagon inched forward in the slow-moving line, and a great puff of white fog issued from beneath Holo's hood as she looked at him irritably.

"Some stew would be nice," she said.

No doubt she was talking about dinner. Evidently the time for affirmations had passed.

"Aye, with this cold. Depending on the price, I'd take a stew with a proper thick flour broth."

"Ho, ho! Sometimes the sweet smell of milk surpasses that of the finest wine."

Seeing her like this, face half-wrapped in the fox fur muffler as she nodded her delighted agreement, erased the past several days of irritated remarks he'd endured.

Sometimes it was good to order something full of tasty ingredients. "A stew made with the vegetables of the season would be especially good," said Lawrence.

"Vegetables? Do you not understand the flavor of delicious stewed meat floating in the creamy broth?"

Despite having spent centuries in the wheat fields, Holo's tastes were more aristocratic than any noble's.

There before the walls of Lenos, Lawrence made one last counterattack. He regretted having indulged her.

"They say fine foods can be bad for the eye and bad for the tongue."

"Oh? And how bad for my heart do you think it was to go so many centuries without so much as a taste?" Holo glared up at him sharply.

She was completely unmoved, her red-tinged chestnut eyes glinting like polished jewels.

In front of such shining gems, the only thing to do was fall to your knees.

But Lawrence was a merchant, not some jewel-crazed noblewoman. If the price wasn't right, there was only one thing to say, even in the face of the most precious gem.

"Perhaps once I've consulted my coin purse."

Holo looked away like a stubborn child.

Even after this exchange, Lawrence knew it was likely that they would wind up having a meat stew. No doubt Holo was confident of this as well.

And yet still they played at arguing.

Lawrence flicked the reins and eased the wagon forward.

As they passed through the checkpoint, Lawrence looked up at the stone wall, which was moss colored from the rain.

He looked down again shortly, though it was not to hide any of his goods from the import tax. No, he wanted only to hide the smile that spread under his beard.

Perhaps it was because of the cold winter rain that there were so few people in the town's streets.

What few were there were mostly children, the mist of their exhalations trailing behind them as they ran here and there with hands clasped tight to their breasts—no doubt on errands for the town's shopkeepers and craftsmen. The phantomlike forms with their bundles of rags were surely doing the same job.

The stalls that faced the street were largely unattended as the

light mist gathered and dribbled from their eaves. Without any shopkeepers to chase them away, a few beggars gathered under a handful of the stalls. It was the very image of a rainy day.

But the fact that just outside the entrance to the town walls there were tents lined up with merchants cooking dinner beneath them meant something was afoot.

Lawrence held in his hand the wooden plaque he'd received at the checkpoint that was proof of his status as a foreign merchant, and listened vaguely as Holo voiced her displeasure.

"'Tis not as though I would place it at the very pinnacle of creation, but is that not an unreachable state, not some matter of relative merit? What say you?"

"Oh, indeed."

"If we are to talk of that which falls short of being inherently superior and that which exceeds its humble origins to become great, I should think the latter more worthy of respect. Am I wrong?"

"...Not at all."

Perhaps it was the fatigue of the long journey. Holo's anger was not the complete rage it normally seemed to be. She expressed her displeasure as a lower, more constant grumble.

In his mind, Lawrence cursed the loudmouthed checkpoint guard whose careless words had brought this upon him—but then he realized that if his replies to Holo were too perfunctory, she'd turn her anger upon him.

"Yes, well, if the choice is between a nobleman with no fame, no charisma, no assets, naught but his lineage, and a canny commoner who's amassed wealth and fame, then surely it's the latter whom I'd respect," agreed Lawrence.

Normally such obsequiousness would only worsen Holo's mood, but at the moment it seemed to be good enough.

She gave an exaggerated, almost drunken nod, then sniffed like an angry bull.



At the checkpoint, they'd been subjected to an extremely thorough search, and the guard had discovered Holo's tail.

Of course, Holo was nonchalant as always and easily passed it off as an underskirt, which the guard seemed to believe, but then he had said this:

"Oh, just a cheap wolf skin."

Being a guard at a town that was a hub for lumber and fur, he'd known how to tell a wolf pelt from a dog or a fox.

And he was not wrong about the value. Wolf pelts were ranked below dog. No matter how fine the quality, no matter how much it made a fur trader drool, the simple fact was that it would never be worth as much as a good deerskin.

The problem arose when that wolf's pride was not so cheap as its fur—and on that count, Holo was expensive indeed.

This explained her angry, childish muttering. Lawrence felt so bad for her that he wanted to stroke her head to comfort her.

Had they still been midjourney, he might have simply held the reins and exchanged snippy remarks with her, but now he only looked at her out of the corner of his eye. He scratched his chin with the corner of the foreign merchant plaque, wondering if some food would help her feel better.

In truth, Lawrence was more concerned with the significance of that plaque.

It appeared hastily made without any kind of official seal on it.

He'd been told that if he wanted to buy commodities in the village, no one would sell to him unless he displayed the plaque.

That was the only explanation he had received. He'd been quickly shooed through the checkpoint, through which a string of travelers passed like an eel wriggling through a trap.

It was a situation no merchant could abide.

This was the first time he'd encountered something like this—not just in Lenos, but in any town.

"So then," said Holo.

"Oh, uh, yes?" A poke at his leg jerked Lawrence out of his reverie, and he met Holo's sharp gaze.

For a moment he wondered if he'd missed her saying something, but before he could ask, Holo continued.

"Will we make the inn soon?"

No doubt she was cold and hungry and could not tolerate riding in the wagon any longer than she had to. "Just ahead around that corner," Lawrence told her. She gave an irritated sigh at the fact that the inn was not immediately in front of her, sinking deeper into her hood.

He would have to be very careful about the amount of meat in tonight's stew. Lawrence thought the matter over as he drove the wagon, and soon enough they arrived at their destination.

It was an ordinary four-story building that somehow fell short of striking one as elegant.

The first floor, which faced the street, had a Dutch door. The lower section could be opened and turned sideways, becoming a surface on which to display goods, and the upper section could function as an awning. Both were currently closed fast, doing their best to hold back the cold winter air.

Holo's expression only darkened. Perhaps she expected to be taken to an inn with a properly maintained facade.

Lawrence avoided explaining to her that even should they spend more money, it did not guarantee a restful inn. He climbed down from the driver's box to avoid her baleful gaze and trotted over to the inn's front door, giving it a knock.

The inn did not have so much as a sign out front, so it was very unlikely to be full, but there was a real possibility that the owner could have closed up because of the cold weather.

So when Lawrence heard the shuffling of someone behind the door just before it opened a crack, he felt a certain amount of relief.

"You staying or selling goods?" a gruff, whitebearded old man brusquely demanded through the barely opened door.

"Staying. Two of us."

The old man gave only a quick nod, then retreated back into the building.

The door was left open, so apparently there were vacancies.

Lawrence glanced back at the wagon. "Which do you want, a bright room or a warm room?" he asked.

The question was unexpected. A crease appeared on Holo's brow. "What else is there but a warm room?"

"Right, I'll take the horse around to the stables. You go on in and talk to the innkeeper—that older gentleman—and tell him that. He'll show you to a room."

"Mm."

Lawrence climbed back into the driver's box and took the reins, trading places with Holo, who got off. The horse, seeming to realize that he was finally about to get out of the driving winter wind and into a warm stable, shook his head as if to hurry them up. With a flick of the reins, Lawrence set the horse to walking, watching Holo enter the inn out of the corner of his eye.

He'd be able to pick her dusty, multilayered robe out of a crowd of a hundred people with no problem.

After all, no matter how many layers she wore, he'd recognize the movements of her swishing tail anywhere.

Smiling to himself, Lawrence guided the horse into the barn, wherein there were two beggars doing lookout duty. They gave Lawrence an appraising glance.

The lookouts never forgot a face, so naturally they remembered Lawrence, and with a gesture of their chins, pointed to where they wanted him to leave his horse. With no reason to refuse, Lawrence complied. In doing so, he noticed that next to his space was a wide-hooved mountain horse, which gave him a flinty glare from

beneath its long, shaggy hair. No doubt it had hauled furs into town from the northlands.

"You two get along now," said Lawrence, patting his own horse on its flank as he climbed down from the wagon, leaving the two beggars with two copper coins before gathering his belongings and heading into the inn.

This particular inn had once been the living quarters of a tannery. The first floor had been the leather strap makers' workshop, and so it was mostly open with few walls and a stone floor. Now it was used to store things, and here and there were goods that various merchants had the inn keep under long-term storage.

Slipping past the jumbled piles of goods that were taller than he was, Lawrence arrived at the only orderly place on the first floor—the innkeeper's room.

On a small table was an iron bowl held up in a three-legged iron brace. The innkeeper burned charcoal in the bowl and drank mulled wine all day, daydreaming of far-off lands. "Next year, I'm going south on pilgrimage," he would frequently say.

The innkeeper noticed Lawrence, looking at him with keen blue eyes beneath bushy brows. "Third floor. Window side."

"Right, third floor—wait, window side?"

Though inn patrons could either pay in advance or at the end of their stay, the stoic innkeeper's mood was improved by pay in advance. Lawrence had thus placed a moderately generous fee on the table, but the innkeeper's words came as a surprise, making him turn around.

"Window side," said the innkeeper again in a low voice, closing his eyes.

The old man did not want to discuss the matter.

Lawrence nodded his head. *Oh well*, he thought to himself as he left the room.

Holding the handrails stained with age and use, he went up the stairs.

Just like the living quarters of any other workshop, on the second floor was a living room with a fireplace, a kitchen, and the master's bedroom. This building was a bit different in that the fireplace was in the center of the living room, and the rooms on the third and fourth floors were built to get as much heat as possible from the chimney that led upwards through the inn.

In addition to the somewhat strange layout that this necessitated, the maintenance necessary to ensure that smoke didn't leak from the chimney and into the rooms was often troublesome. The master of this building, however, had chosen the comfort of the apprentices that would live on the third and fourth floors.

The current innkeeper was a kind, if quiet man. His name was Arold Ecklund, and he had been the head craftsman of the tannery.

When night fell, the odd downstairs living room would be filled with friendly chatter as the guests each came bearing various wines. Now, though, all that could be heard was the quietly crackling fire.

There were four rooms on the third floor.

Back when the building had been a workshop, the fourth floor was used for new apprentices and as storage for odds and ends, so the third-floor rooms were larger.

But not all of those rooms received the benefit of the warmth from the chimney. Only one of the third-floor rooms faced the street, and in order to accommodate a window to let in light, it sacrificed access to the chimney.

In other words, having a window meant sacrificing heat.

Lawrence was sure that Holo had said she preferred a warm room. As he entered their quarters, he saw that she'd already taken off and scattered all her wet clothes everywhere and was huddled beneath the covers of her bed.

He wondered if she was crying from the indignity of it all, but

looking at the way she lay curled up in the blanket, she seemed to have fallen asleep.

Staying angry for so long must have tired her out, Lawrence supposed.

He gathered up her discarded clothes, draping them temporarily over the back of a chair, and he removed his own traveling garb. This was the most relieving part of any journey—the moment when he could remove his wet things at an inn. They felt like damp clay as he peeled them off, set them aside, and changed into his normal clothes, which hadn't yet been soaked with rain.

His standard outfit was admittedly cold, but it was still better than staying wet.

Without a fireplace, the room would be no warmer than a campsite once night fell.

A mere blanket wouldn't be enough to stave off the chill. He realized this as he bundled up Holo's heavy, rain-soaked clothing like a manservant.

Holo's tail stuck out from underneath the blanket, which otherwise looked as if it had been thrown over a pile of bread, cheese, or bacon.

She really didn't play fair, thought Lawrence.

It wasn't quite the same thing as a nobleman's daughter flashing her long, beautiful hair out the window of her chamber to catch the eye of a passing knight—but nonetheless, Lawrence felt compelled to respond.

"I think your tail is lovely; it's warm with fine fur."

A moment passed, and Holo pulled her tail in underneath the blanket.

Lawrence could only heave a sigh.

Holo was hardly the sort of sensitive girl whose wounded feelings could be soothed with a single compliment from him. Even at this very moment, she surely still harbored a smoldering grudge.

And yet she had gotten Lawrence to praise her tail.

Lawrence smiled ruefully to himself as he descended the stairs, sighing again. In her own way, Holo relied on him. That was all the reason he needed.

It could be one of her clever traps, but being caught in them wasn't such a bad feeling.

He took advantage of the fact that a mind-reading wolf wasn't planted next to him to mull over such thoughts as he entered the living room, which housed the fireplace.

There was no one there. His only company was the echoes of the crackling firewood.

Furniture was scarce. A single chair was illuminated by the flickering light of the fire. That chair alone wouldn't be enough to dry the bundle of clothes Lawrence held in both arms, but he was unconcerned.

Here and there on the walls of the living room were nails that had been only half pounded in, their heads turned up to act as hooks. A leather strap dangled from one of them, long enough to be connected to a hook on the opposite wall. On rainy days, this was excellent for drying the clothes of sodden travelers, and on clear days, it worked well for drying vegetables and meat to serve as supplies for people resuming their journeys.

Lawrence quickly set up the line and hung the wet clothes across it.

The robes were larger than he'd reckoned, and he wound up having to use the entirety of the line.

"Just so long as no one else comes to dry their clothes," Lawrence murmured to himself as he sat down on the single chair before the fireplace.

The next moment, he heard the creaking sound of the staircase.

"..."

Apparently the creak had actually come from the hallway.

Lawrence turned his gaze toward the sound and met the eyes of a figure who had climbed up the stairs and now peered into the living room.

His head was wrapped in a cowl, which also covered most of his face, obscuring whatever expression he might have had, but his gaze was keen and steady. He was not especially tall, but neither short—perhaps a bit taller than Holo.

His traveling clothes were heavy and squared his figure. The most outstanding feature of the fellow's attire were his leather boots with thick, leather strap work that bound them to his calves. They were proof of a traveler who eschewed horseback in favor of his own two feet, and the tightness with which the straps were tied was evidence of the severity of the season.

The pale blue eyes that regarded Lawrence through the gap in those heavy layers of clothing were pure and keen—and unsympathetic.

After giving Lawrence a long, appraising look, the figure continued wordlessly up the stairs.

Despite carrying a heavy load, his footsteps were nearly silent.

The stranger also seemed to have secured a third-floor room. From above his head, Lawrence heard a door open, then close.

Arold mostly left his guests alone, which made his inn particularly prized among those who weren't interested in being sociable. Even among merchants, not all of them were extroverts.

Lawrence used this inn when he was in Lenos because the price and facilities were good and because Arold had been a member of the Rowen Trade Guild. Once Arold had been a traveling fur merchant, but he'd married into the tannery and taken over as its master.

Since the town didn't have a Rowen guild house, many guild members used this inn when passing through.

Arold's tendency to leave his guests alone was especially convenient now with Holo along.

In reality, the foremost issue on Lawrence's mind was securing the meat stew that would hopefully improve Holo's mood. If it would make her feel better, a bowl or two of stew was nothing, but the total cost of staying in this town could skyrocket if he let his guard down.

The fatigue of his long journey crept up on him as he pondered the problem there before the fireplace, and soon he dozed off.

He woke once when Arold came to add fuel to the fire, but Arold of course said nothing and in fact was rather generous in his use of firewood, prompting Lawrence to decide to enjoy the old man's courtesy.

Lawrence woke again after the sun had set, when but for the firelight, the darkness in the room was so thick it seemed one could easily ladle cupfuls of it.

Realizing he had overslept, Lawrence scrambled to his feet, but he could not turn back time. No doubt the selfish Holo had long since awoken and was nursing a fine temper back in their room, unable to leave until Lawrence returned with her clothes.

Lawrence sighed, and after checking to see that the clothes were in fact dry, he quickly collected them and returned to the third-floor room.

It went without saying that Holo was fit to be tied.

The stew Lawrence finally ordered at the tavern he chose at random was a luxuriously meaty one indeed.

The next morning, Lawrence awoke to sunny weather. Warm slivers of light found their way in through the cracks in the wooden window. Despite their room not receiving the benefit of the fireplace, the morning chill was not so bad as it might have been, thanks either to the sunlight or to the merchant having grown accustomed to freezing cold nights on the road.

Either way, given this warmth, Lawrence could understand why Holo had chosen the brighter room.

The morning sun certainly earned its adoration.

In a rare turn of events, Lawrence was awake before Holo, whose head protruded from the blanket under which she slept. Normally she slept curled up like a proper wolf, so to see her slumbering more like the maiden she appeared to be was novel.

The few previous occasions when Holo had overslept were all the results of hangovers, but her complexion looked healthy this morning.

Given the guileless expression on her exposed face, Lawrence supposed she was simply sleeping late.

"Well then," he murmured.

It was all well and good to stare at Holo's face for a while, but if the irritable wisewolf noticed him, he would hear no end of it.

What he needed to be doing was preparing to venture out into the town. He stroked his beard.

Naturally longer beards were commonplace in the north country, but his was still a bit too long, and a self-indulgently long beard was hardly attractive. As he retrieved a washcloth and blade from his things in preparation for borrowing some hot water from Arold, the keen-eared wolf on the bed stirred, seemingly wakened by the sound.

After hearing her utter a displeased groan, Lawrence became aware of her gaze upon his back.

"I'm off to tend to my pelt," said Lawrence, putting the sheathed blade to his chin.

Holo yawned, then smiled wordlessly, narrowing her eyes. She seemed to be in a good temper.

"Have to make sure it'll fetch a good price, after all," Lawrence added.

Holo hid her mouth behind the blanket. "I'm sure 'tis worth a king's ransom."

Perhaps it was because she had just woken. Her eyes were gentle despite their drowsiness.

No doubt she was at least half teasing him, but he couldn't help but be a little pleased at her honest, straightforward words. He shrugged to hide his embarrassment.

Holo continued. "Aye, a price so high none will buy it," she said with a glitter of malice in her eyes now as she shifted from lying on her stomach to her back. "Has anyone so far?"

She certainly had a talent for luring people into premature happiness, Lawrence thought to himself.

He waggled the tip of the blade he held to signal his surrender, at which Holo giggled, snuggling back underneath the blanket and rolling over as if going back to sleep.

Lawrence sighed.

It was both frustrating and strangely amusing to be constantly toyed with like this.

He left the room and headed down the stairs, hand on the banister, as he smiled ruefully to himself.

But that smile vanished when he noticed someone else there before him.

"Good morning," said Lawrence pleasantly to the fellow lodger who appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

It was the same hooded stranger he'd glimpsed briefly while drying his clothes the previous night.

The stranger wore the same cowl, but his robes were somewhat looser now, and his feet were shod in sandals. Having perhaps bought a pastry for breakfast, he held a faintly steaming package in his right hand.

"...Aye," replied the stranger in a near whisper as they passed, glancing at Lawrence with blue eyes through the gap in his cowl.

The voice was hoarse, the voice of a traveler well suited to dry sand and rocky terrain.

Despite the stranger's unsociability, Lawrence felt a certain kinship.

In any case, once he smelled the scent of the meat pie that issued up from the lodger's package, he knew for a certainty that Holo would soon be demanding one for herself.

"What comes next, then?" asked Holo, a scrap of meat clinging to the corner of her mouth and a meat pie in one hand.

"Well, first we've got to collect whatever stories about you we can find."

"Mm. Stories of me and of the whereabouts of Yoitsu...."

Munch, munch, munch. Three bites were all it took to polish off the hand-sized remnants of the meat pie. They were swallowed and gone in a twinkling.

"Just like in Kumersun, we need to find a chronicler," said Lawrence.

"I'll just leave that to you. You know better than me how to accomplish the thing... What? What is it?"

Lawrence waved his hand lightly at Holo's questioning look, smiling. "So if I know how to accomplish the thing, what do you know?" He returned her blank gaze. "There's a saying that goes: 'He who knows how to do something is the servant of he who knows why that thing must be done.'"

"Mm. I see. And I do know why it is that you work so gallantly."

"The men of old spoke true," said Lawrence, biting into his own pie.

Holo sat cross-legged on the bed and continued. "If I'm your master, then I suppose I should give you a reward."

"A reward?"

"Aye. Such as, hmm...," began Holo with a smile that felt to Lawrence as if fairly painted with something bewitching. "What is it you desire?"

The room was seductively dim, and Lawrence would have felt his heart skip a beat but for the scrap of meat that still clung to the corner of Holo's mouth.

Lawrence finished his own meat pie, then pointed at the corner of his own mouth. "Nothing in particular," he told Holo.

"Hmph," said Holo, vaguely frustrated as she plucked the meat scrap from her mouth.

"It would be nice if you were a bit more pleasant," added Lawrence.

Holo's hand froze and her lip twitched. She flicked her finger, sending the scrap of food flying. "So now you treat me like a child?"

"Not at all. Children actually do as they're told, for one." Lawrence took hold of a jug of chilled water, taking a swig, then paused. "Anyway, first I suppose we'll ask the innkeeper here. He may be old, but he's still the master of an inn."

Lawrence stood and put on his coat by way of preparation. For Holo's part, she crawled off the bed.

"You're coming along, right?" asked Lawrence.

"Aye, even if you slapped my wrist," said Holo. As she bantered, she quickly put on her waistcloth, robe, and cape with such practiced ease that Lawrence looked on as though enchanted. The wolf twirled theatrically and spoke. "Should I clap my hands now, the spell I've cast upon you may well be broken!"

So that's what she was doing.

Lawrence decided to play along.

"Huh? What am I doing here? Oh, that's right—this is Lenos, city of lumber and fur. I should stock up on furs and head to the next town," he said, using exaggerated gesticulations. He'd seen his share of traveling theatrical troupes.

Holo put her hands to her midriff and laughed as though watching a grand comedy.

After giggling for a moment, she scampered over to Lawrence, whose hand was on the room's door, ready to open it. "Oh, la, are you a traveling merchant? I've a good eye, me, for judging the quality of furs," she said.

Lawrence took her hand, then opened the door, answering, "Oh ho! You've a discerning eye, 'tis true. But can you judge the quality of a person?"

The stairs creaked in the morning quiet of the inn.

When they reached the second floor, Holo fixed Lawrence with her gaze. "I've an evil spell cast upon me."

Lawrence flashed a quick smile, as if to ask what she was getting at. "I suppose I'd best not clap, so as to avoid breaking it," he said.

"You've already clapped once."

"So you're saying the spell's coming undone?"

There was no telling where the trap in this conversation was.

This was how Holo would extort him into buying her treats.

He pondered how to avoid that particular eventuality as they passed the second floor where he saw a pair of travelers who had evidently fallen asleep while chatting in front of the fireplace.

As they continued down to the first floor, a tug at Lawrence's hand pulled him out of his reverie.

To be precise, Holo, who had been holding his hand the entire time, stopped descending the stairs.

She looked down at him, smiling softly from underneath her hood. "So then, will you cast another spell upon me so that I do not wake?"

It was a devilish play.

No doubt Holo would be satisfied if Lawrence was unable to answer.

But Lawrence wanted to get the best of her every once in a while, so he turned around and took her hand again in his.

In all the world, there was only one reason a man would take a woman's hand in this way.

He cradled her pale hand gently, then lightly kissed it.

"Will this do, milady?" he asked, his pronunciation appropriately archaic.

If he wasn't careful, blood would rush up to his face, ruining the effect.

But he kept his composure and looked up into Holo's eyes, which were wide and round as saucers.

"Come, let's go," he said, a smile finally appearing on his lips—a smile both of recognition that he had done something ridiculous and of victory at having gotten the best of Holo.

He pulled lightly on her hand, and she came down the steps like a slack-stringed puppet.

Her face was downcast, and he could not clearly make out her expression, but she seemed to be irritated.

Lawrence chuckled inwardly. Restraining his embarrassment had been worth the trouble. He felt a swell of triumph, but then Holo stumbled forward as if having missed a step, and he hurried to catch her.

Just as he began to laugh, wondering if she was too frustrated to stand, she hugged him tightly and whispered in his ear, "That's a spell too strong, foolish boy."

The voice was peevish, irritated.

If Lawrence had been the person he was when they first met, either his mind would have gone blank or he would have simply returned her embrace.

As it was he did neither and simply smiled, which he thought would only be more frustrating for her.

Back in the village of Tereo, Lawrence had begun to open a box that contained an uncomfortable truth—the truth that these halcyon days with Holo might soon be coming to an end. But he did not want to open the box himself. Holo, too, had put her hand on it.

But at the time, neither of them wanted to confront its contents, so for now the box remained closed.

Yet there were some things he understood.

Holo did not want to confront the issue unless she had to.

Though he could now maintain his composure as she clung to him and whispered in his ear, he would never have imagined he could be of such help to her.

Her uncombed bangs against his cheek were still straight and smooth and smelled sweet though untouched by any perfume. They were so fine he didn't even bother to start counting the strands.

Holo eventually realized that Lawrence had shown no reaction at all. She pulled away and looked up at him.

"Just when are you going to become properly flustered?" she asked.

"Mm, indeed. When you stop doing such things, I suppose."

Holo was extremely quick.

She soon divined the meaning of his words and affected frustration. "You've become quite clever, you have."

"Mm, perhaps," said Lawrence, at which Holo let go of him entirely, gave a soft sigh through her nose, and began descending the stairs.

If she enjoyed seeing Lawrence flustered, then she would have to tease him, but if what truly flustered him was when she stopped doing so, then her only recourse was to behave herself.

Lawrence allowed himself a bit of self-satisfaction at his skillful turnaround as he followed Holo down the stairs, but when she reached the bottom, she spun around.

"Yes, you've certainly developed a way with words. Whoever has been teaching you, I wonder?"

What surprised Lawrence most was her smile. It was strangely good-natured and warm enough to thaw a chilled hand.

He'd thought for sure she was irritated with him, so this sudden change put him on his guard as he stood before her.

"No—it just came to me in the moment, that's all."

"In the moment?" Holo giggled. "That's even better." She seemed so pleased that if she had been a puppy, her tail would've been wagging rapidly.

Uncomprehending, Lawrence looked at Holo as she took his left hand, intertwining her fingers with his.

"When I stop doing such things, eh?" she murmured again, drawing flirtatiously close to him.

When she stops doing such things...?

A strange feeling came over Lawrence when he heard the words again.

The moment he realized the other meaning they held, he froze in his tracks.

Holo giggled. "Whatever is the matter?"

The melted-snow clarity of her high spirits clashed with the swamplike stickiness of her wit.

Lawrence could not bring himself to look at her.

It was when she didn't toy with him that he became flustered.

What have I said, he wanted to cry out.

Why, it was tantamount to outrightly declaring that he wanted her attention above all else!

"What's this? Your circulation seems to have improved," said Holo.

Indeed, Lawrence could not stop the flush that rose to his face.

He covered his eyes with his free hand, wanting to at least show some shame that he'd not realized the true implications of what he was saying.

Holo, however, had no intention of letting him do so. "Goodness, there's no need to be ashamed of such sweet, childish words."

Swish, swish came the sound of her tail.

Getting the best of a wisewolf in a duel of words was truly an impossible dream.

Holo chuckled. "You surely are adorable, you are."

Through the spaces between his fingers, Lawrence caught sight of Holo's face—cupped in her hands, sporting an infinitely malicious grin.

Arold had evidently been busy with something in the stables, so fortunately he hadn't overheard Lawrence's foolish exchange with Holo.

There was no question that Holo had been aware of this as she'd toyed with Lawrence.

"A chronicler, you say?" asked Arold.

"Aye. Or someone else who would know the old tales of the town."

Arold sat in his usual chair and poured some mulled wine into a cup fashioned from a sheet of thin, beaten metal. He raised his left eyebrow in curiosity. It was clear he never expected to hear this kind of question from a guest.

But where other innkeepers would certainly begin inquiring about a guest's background, Arold did no such thing. He merely stroked his snow-white beard for a moment before answering.

"There's a man named Rigolo who does such things...but unfortunately he's at the Council of Fifty right now. I surely doubt he'll take visitors."

"The Council of Fifty?" asked Lawrence.

Arold poured mulled wine into two small earthenware cups, offering them to Lawrence and Holo.

Just as the name suggested, the Council of Fifty was a council of fifty members—representatives of the town's tradesmen, merchants, and noblemen. Each of them represented their own clan or trade guild and advocated that organization's interests in vigorous debates. The outcome of those debates decided the fate of the town, so each representative carried a heavy burden of responsibility.

Once there had been significant political jockeying around seats on the council, but a great plague some years previous had evidently left many seats empty.

"Did you not see the state of things outside the town...?" asked Arold.

"We saw. The merchant encampment, yes? If that's connected with the Council of Fifty, then is there some trouble within the town?"

Holo put the proffered wine to her lips but froze shortly thereafter.

No doubt her tail was puffing up at the same instant. There was no telling the quality of a drink from a new region, after all.

"It's the furs, you see," said Arold.

"The furs?" Lawrence asked, suddenly excited. A chill ran down his spine at the mention of the word. It wasn't because he was concerned about Holo—far from it. The word was so familiar to him that he felt a visceral reaction at the sudden remembrance of what he'd spent so much time pursuing—profit.

But Arold continued as if he hadn't heard the question. "Rigolo's the secretary of the council," he said. Apparently he didn't want to discuss the council meeting, and Arold wasn't a particularly loquacious person to begin with. "And you're looking for people who know old tales, then," he finished.

"Er, yes. That would be fine. Do you know of any?" He couldn't let the anticipation show on his face.

Lawrence's self-discipline seemed to have worked. Arold's blue eyes, nearly buried in the wrinkles of his face, squinted off into the distance. "Bolta the tanner's grandmother was a wise old woman...but she died in the plague four years gone."

"And there are no others?"

"Others? Mm...the old man of the Latton Company, but no, the heat of the summer last year did him in..." Arold set his cup down with an audible *thunk*.

Lawrence noticed Holo look over at Arold, probably at the sound he had just made.

"I suppose the town's old wisdom only exists as written word now," said Arold, aghast at the realization as he continued to gaze somewhere far away, stroking his beard.

Lawrence could tell that, beneath her robes, Holo's body twitched in surprise.

There was no one who had direct knowledge of her. Holo herself was that forgotten wisdom.

Lawrence immediately forgot the thrill he had felt only a moment ago and wordlessly put his hand on Holo's back. "So that means we've no course but to go to Mr. Rigolo and have him show us the chronicles?"

"I suppose so... The months and years weather even stone buildings, to say nothing of the writings of men. 'Tis a dreadful thing..." Arold shook his head, closing his eyes and falling silent.

The old man had been a recluse when Lawrence had first met him, and it seemed that tendency had only deepened with time.

Lawrence couldn't help but wonder whether it was the ever-clearer sound of death's approach that drove this.

Deciding that further conversation would only bring trouble, Lawrence finished his remaining wine in a single draught, and inviting Holo to go ahead of him, he went outside.

In a sudden turnabout from the previous day, the street was busy, and the sun that shone down from Lawrence's left was bright enough to make him briefly dizzy.

He stood there on the still slick cobblestone street and looked at Holo.

She seemed dejected.

"Shall we find something to eat?" Even Lawrence thought that was roughly the worst thing he could have said, but things

were so difficult at the moment that everything was turned inside out.

Beneath her hood, Holo gave a long-suffering sigh, then smiled. "You ought to build your vocabulary," she said, pulling on Lawrence's hand.

Apparently it was premature to worry that she was going to start something here in the crowds.

Just as Lawrence was pulled away, the door to the inn opened once again.

"..."

It was the stranger from before that emerged.

The man was the very image of a busy traveler, but when he looked at Lawrence and Holo, he froze, visibly surprised.

"...Pardon" was all he said in a high, hoarse voice after a moment and then immediately melted into the crowd.

Lawrence looked at Holo just to be sure that her ears and tail weren't visible. She cocked her head slightly.

"Seemed a bit surprised to see me," said Holo.

"Surely he doesn't suspect you're not human."

"I did not get that sense from her. Perhaps she was merely taken aback by my comeliness."

"Surely not," replied a smiling Lawrence to Holo, whose chest was thrust out with exaggerated pride. "Wait," he added. "She?"

"Hmm?"

"That was a woman?"

The well-traveled look and hoarse voice of the stranger had made him assume otherwise, but Holo could hardly be wrong about such things.

Lawrence looked in the direction in which she had disappeared and wondered what a female traveling merchant could possibly be trading in when he felt another tug at his hand.

"What exactly makes you think it is acceptable to be standing beside me and staring thus at another female?"

"Must you be so direct? A more roundabout complaint would be far more charming."

"You're such a dunce you'd never catch on unless I spoke plainly," Holo shot back without flinching, scorn in her voice.

Given their earlier conversation, it was sad indeed that Lawrence was unable to refute her.

"So, what shall we do next?" Lawrence asked, putting an end to the foolish exchange. They needed to plan their day.

"Will it be difficult to meet that man—whatever was his name?"

"Rigolo or some such. If he's the secretary of the council, it may well be difficult, though that may depend on exactly what the council is doing...," said Lawrence, scratching his just-tidied beard.

Holo took a step forward. "'Tis clear enough from your face that you're desperate to know what that meeting is about."

"Is it?" asked Lawrence, stroking his beard. Holo's expression as she looked over her shoulder at him was mean-spirited indeed.

"So we'll instead loaf about town until the meeting is adjourned, I expect?"

Lawrence smiled. "The wisewolf's powers of observation are keen indeed. I'm dying to know what's going on with this town. Not just that, I—"

"You want to turn it into profit."

Lawrence slumped. Holo cocked her head at him and smiled.

"Whatever it is, it's serious enough that they're passing out these wooden plaques. Something interesting must be happening," said Lawrence, taking the foreign merchant registration plaque out of his back pocket.

"Still, though, a warning—," said Holo.

"Hmm?"

"Try to restrain yourself."

Holo's words were hard to laugh off ruefully since so far they had been through kidnappings, chased through sewers, faced bankruptcy, and most recently, caught up in a giant feud.

"I will," he answered, whereupon the wisewolf that had been so lovely up until a few moments ago turned suddenly angry.

"I wonder about that," she said.

In the face of her sudden suspicion, Lawrence had but one recourse.

He took her hand and used every ounce of his bargaining charm. "Shall we see the sights of the town, then?"

The effect of his kissing her hand on the stairs a moment earlier seemed to be wearing thin. Either that or it had just reversed itself.

Still, Holo seemed to give him a passing mark. Sniffing, she stood next to Lawrence. "I suppose so."

"Understood, milady."

Lawrence reflected that if his self from half a year earlier could see him now, he would be terrified.

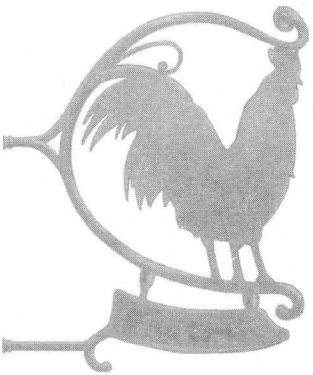
"So what sights are there to see? It's changed so much that in truth I hardly remember ever coming here."

"Let's go to the docks. I hear it's only recently that ships have become so important. It won't be as large as seaside docks, but I daresay, it's still a highlight."

He held Holo's hand tighter and began to walk.

Who was it that said walking with another was slow and bothersome? As he walked in step with Holo next to him, Lawrence thought about this and smiled.

CHAPTER TWO



"Well, I suppose this is how it goes," Lawrence murmured.

"Hmm?" Holo looked over at him, her face half hidden by the cup from which she drank.

"Nothing. Don't spill that."

"Mmm."

Holo drained her cup of Lenos's famously strong ale, then picked up a slightly charred shellfish.

The clams that were taken from the river that flowed past Lenos, the Roam, were about the size of Holo's hand. A delicacy famous in the town was made by taking the soft clam meat, mixing it with bread crumbs, and then serving it on the shell. Served with mustard seed, it was hard to imagine a finer accompaniment to a good ale.

Holo had uttered a cry of delight at seeing the many river scows anchored along the curve of the port, but her heart was soon stolen by the delicious scents that wafted from the food vendors, who had their stalls set up to feed the hungry passengers either beginning or ending their voyages.

They sat at a table constructed from old wooden crates; in front of Holo were three servings of clams, plus the two ales she had already drained.

Lawrence endured a nasty look from Holo when he ordered mulled wine, not unlike what Arold had been drinking earlier.

With this tartness, all he needed now was time to properly enjoy the wine.

"Still, at a glance it doesn't look like there's any particular problem with the town," said Lawrence.

Crates as big as a man were being unloaded from the scows and pried open by groups of merchants, who immediately began dickering over their contents, whatever they might have been.

A port of this size handled a staggering amount of goods. And even without the port, it was clear at a glance that a town like this would demand a massive concentration of materials.

It wasn't just the food required daily. For example, the lumber industry needed not only timber, but also tools—saws, chisels, nails, hammers—so traveling metalworkers would come to the town to repair and maintain those tools. Packaging and overland transport of the lumber took rope and leatherwork and horses or donkeys along with the tack those animals required—the list went on and on.

Also, the simple fact that the town was a port meant that shipbuilders and their tools were a brisk trade as were ships themselves. Only an omniscient deity could hope to grasp the amounts and varieties of goods involved.

Looking at the overwhelming liveliness and energy of this motley port town, any subtle, small problems would be immediately lost in the jumble.

Using a knife she had borrowed from Lawrence, Holo deftly scooped the minced clam out of its shell and popped it into her mouth, scanning their surroundings upon hearing Lawrence's words. She then took a drink of ale. "From far away, the forest can seem calm, even when two wolf packs are in a fierce battle for territory within it."

"Even with your eyes and ears, you cannot tell that from afar?"

Holo did not immediately answer, instead looking down with exaggerated gravity and twitching her ears beneath her hood.

Normally Lawrence would have grown impatient with Holo, who would have then teased him, but today he had his tart mulled wine. He sipped it and waited for her response.

"Can you see over there?" she asked after a time, pointing with the knife she held to a man surrounded by some kind of steam. The man leaned against a large, waist-high bucket, which had been filled to heaping with finely crushed rock. He was thickly muscled, and it was not hard to imagine him as a pirate.

He scowled, and the object of that scowl was a slim merchant holding a bundle of what might have been sheepskins.

Lawrence nodded in response to Holo's question.

"The man's angry," she said seriously.

"Oh?"

"It seems the tax on the ship's cargo was too high, and he does not want to hand over the goods at the original price. Something about a head price?"

"A hostage tax. Because ships heading up the river are essentially hostages of the landlord that owns that section of the river."

"Mm. In any case, the skinny fellow's reply is this: 'The town's in crisis because the military did not hold its northern campaign this year.' He's saying they should be grateful to get any money at all."

Every winter, the Church funded a great military campaign into the northlands as a way of displaying its power, but a shadow had fallen over the relationship between the Church and the nation of Ploania, through which its campaign passed, so this year's incursion had been canceled. As a consequence, Lawrence had once been driven to the brink of bankruptcy.

Lawrence looked at Holo a bit surprised. She continued to listen carefully, head bowed and eyes shut.

Then Lawrence looked back at the two men. Even from this distance, he could see the merchant give what seemed to be his final word on the subject to the sailor.

"'In that case, you and those furs can just wait on the outcome of the meeting,'" said Holo, opening her eyes.

Was it too far-fetched to consider if he was merely standing on Holo's shoulders? Lawrence wondered.

"There are many conversations like this one. I'd say...four. Taxes are too high. Northern campaign. Town imports—and so on." Holo scraped the meat out of a clam as she spoke. The more meat accumulated on the blade of the knife, the more her attention turned to it.

By the time she finally brought the pile of meat to her mouth, the blade might as well have been the whole of creation as far as she was concerned.

"Now that you mention it...I reckon there's no way a town founded on distribution wouldn't feel the effects of a canceled northern campaign. That's how I got into trouble back in Ruvinheigen. But what's the relationship between that and the encampment of merchants outside the town?" mused Lawrence.

If conditions in the town were abnormal, then abnormal business opportunities would follow.

Lawrence was lost in deep thought until Holo gave a vulgar burp and pounded on the table.

"You want seconds?"

Lawrence's attention was utterly captured by the situation in Lenos. A quick cost-benefit calculation made it clear that if he could get Holo to be quiet or to perhaps even help him in his conjectures, buying her a drink or two was a bargain.

He hailed the shopkeeper and ordered again, at which Holo gave a satisfied smile, cocking her head.

"I daresay the wine you just ordered was more for your sake than my own."

"Mm?"

"I become drunk on liquor, but your liquor is something different entirely." Her pleased face had a slight flush to it.

Evidently she had noticed that though Lawrence would generally have hesitated and furrowed his brow, this time he'd ordered her another round without any trouble at all.

"Aye, but it takes coin to buy liquor, while becoming drunk on the business possibilities right in front of your eyes is free."

"And you're surely thinking that if I'll stop my howling or even deign to assist you, a drink or two would be a small price to pay, are you not?"

She was a girl-sized giant.

Lawrence expressed his capitulation to Holo, who had a fleck of ale foam at the corner of her mouth.

"Ah, though 'tis amusing to watch you puzzle things over, I'll sit here drinking and watch from the side," said Holo.

When the order of wine and crackling, hot-from-the-fire clams came back, Lawrence handed a few worn-out copper *ryut* coins to the shopkeeper, looking steadily at Holo. "I imagine I should glance at you every so often to make sure you haven't disappeared?"

He passed the full cup of ale to Holo who smiled. "...Not bad."

Holo was a tough grader, so Lawrence took this as a compliment. "Why, thank you," he said sagely.

A bit before midday, Lawrence wound up walking around Lenos by himself.

Holo found herself surprised by the degree to which the travel fatigue that still lingered exaggerated the effects of the alcohol. She could get to her feet easily enough, but she was so sleepy, there was nothing for it.

Lawrence saw her back to the inn, simultaneously at a loss and slightly amused.

Part of Holo hated the idea of Lawrence sticking his nose into whatever was going on in this town. Looking back at their experiences so far, Lawrence couldn't really disagree with her, but if he looked even further back, to experiences before his time with Holo, it became even more difficult to sit still.

Thus, it was rather convenient to now be able to wander around the town as he pleased.

Not that he had any particularly close acquaintances here.

After a moment of agonizing over it, Lawrence ultimately decided to head for a tavern with which he'd once done business.

It was an establishment with the strange name of The Beast and Fish Tail. A large bronze sign cast in the shape of a rodent hung from the eaves. The curious, clever creature it depicted built dams across rivers and had a mammal's body—except for its wide, flat tail and webbed, paddlelike rear feet, which had caused the Church to declare it a fish.

Thus, despite the delicious, savory smell of cooking meat that wafted out of the tavern, it attracted a not-insignificant number of clergy. No matter how much "fish" they ate, no one could criticize them.

While the tavern's ability to serve this rare meat made it popular in the evenings, at this hour, not yet midday, even the Beast and Fish Tail was mostly empty. There were no customers, only a shopgirl sitting at a table in the corner, mending her apron.

"Are you open?" Lawrence asked from the entrance.

A piece of thread held in the corner of her mouth, the red-haired girl lifted her apron to examine her work, smiling playfully. "I just patched a hole. Have a look?" said the fetching lass in reply.

"I'll pass. You know what they say, 'eyes like daggers' and all. If I look too closely, I'm liable to open holes anew."

The girl put her needle away in a sewing box, then stood and tied on the newly mended apron, shaking her head playfully. "So the reason my apron wears thin is from customers staring at it rather than me?"

No doubt the girl dealt with many a drunken patron.

But as a merchant, Lawrence couldn't very well lose this little duel of wits.

"I'm sure they're merely being thoughtful—they don't wish to ruin your beauty by staring a new nostril into your nose, after all."

"Oh? That's a shame. That might let me sniff out suspicious customers a bit more easily," said the girl ruefully as she finished cinching up her apron.

Lawrence slumped, defeated. He had to give the girl credit.

She giggled. "I guess it's true that out-of-town customers really are different. So what'll it be? Wine? A meal?"

"Two orders of fish tail. Wrapped, please."

A momentary look of worry passed over the girl's face, probably because of the sounds of clattering pots that issued from the kitchen.

They were most likely preparing the lunches to serve the rush of workers that would soon be coming from the docks.

"I'm not in a hurry," said Lawrence.

"Perhaps some wine, then?"

In other words, was he willing to wait?

Lawrence smiled at the girl's business acumen, then nodded.

"We've barley and grape wine, as well as pear."

"Pear wine at this time of year?"

Fruit wine spoiled quickly.

"For some reason, it never went bad in storage. Oops—," said the girl, covering her mouth in an exaggerated fashion.

The tavern had always been jam-packed when Lawrence had visited before, so he'd never had a proper conversation with this

girl, but now it was easy to see that the tavern owed the comely lass much of its success.

"Pear, then."

"Coming right up! Just a moment if you please." She disappeared into the back of the tavern, her skirt—which was a dark, ashen red that made it impossible to know its original color—fluttering behind her.

A clever, cheerful barmaid like her in a port town such as this might wind up the wife of the second son of a successful merchant with many ships to his name.

Or she might turn a cold shoulder to any rich man or pretty lad that came courting, instead falling for a completely normal merchant that happened into the tavern.

When it came to knowing where a purchased commodity should be taken, Lawrence had some idea, but this sort of thing was outside his area of expertise. If he asked Holo, she probably could have told him the truth, but that was somehow frustrating.

"Here you are. The rest will take a bit of time, but that will give you a chance to ask any questions you might have."

She really was a clever girl.

If he could get her to talk to Holo, it would be a magnificent display.

"Merchants coming in here at this time of day really only have one thing on their minds. If it is something I can answer, I'll be more than happy to," said the girl.

"I'll pay first."

Lawrence put two dark copper coins down before taking the cup of pear wine.

In this tavern, one copper was enough for two or three cups.

The girl's face was now the very image of a tavern barmaid. "And?"

"Ah, yes, well, it's nothing serious. The town seems a bit differ-

ent from usual. Suppose I was to ask about the encampment of merchants just outside the walls."

Given the generosity of the tip, the girl probably expected to be asked for inside information on one of the trading companies. She seemed relieved to hear Lawrence's actual question.

"Oh, them. They all deal in furs or fur-related products."

"Furs?"

"Quite. About half of them have come from afar to buy up furs. The other half deal in the materials needed for tanning and treating furs and skins. Let's see..."

"Lime and alum?"

They were the most common materials needed for tanning work. Pigeon droppings strangely were also used. If the skins were to be dyed, many more goods would be needed.

"That sounds right, yes."

Lawrence thought back to Arold's words.

There was no question that the Council of Fifty's meeting had something to do with the fur trade.

"And you wanted to know why all those merchants are camped out there, right? Well, right now, all the leaders of the town are meeting to decide whether or not to sell furs to them. In the meantime, buying and selling furs is forbidden. So naturally, the craftsmen don't know whether there's any point in buying any of the supplies they need for tanning, so—that's where we are right now."

Having been asked about it over and over again, the girl was probably used to explaining the matter. But if it was true, the situation was serious.

"So what caused this?" asked Lawrence, forgetting about his pear wine entirely.

"That thing, you know—where lots of people come through in the wintertime."

"The northern campaign."

"Right, that. It was canceled, so they say none of the usual people are coming through to buy leather clothes. Usually there would be a lot more people in this city this time of year."

When people came, so, too, came coin. Furs from the north were especially popular in the south, so they made excellent souvenirs.

But why then was there a meeting discussing whether to prohibit fur trade entirely?

Were the merchants camped in front of the town not there to purchase furs? Even without the normal boom in leather clothing sales that came with the northern campaign, shouldn't they sell to what buyers had come?

He needed more information.

"I understand that the usual people that come through to buy leather clothing aren't around this year, but shouldn't they still sell to the merchants outside of town?" Lawrence asked.

The girl looked at the untouched cup of pear wine in Lawrence's hand and with a smile gestured for him to drink.

She had an instinctual understanding of how to incite a man.

If he tried to resist, she would either become irritated or flirt emptily with him.

He meekly put the cup to his lips, at which point the girl smiled as if to say, *Good answer*. "Knights and mercenaries, they're free with their coin. But the merchants that come to town are as miserly as they come." She played idly with the two copper coins that Lawrence had set down. "I've been given things, overly frilly dresses like some nobleman's daughter would wear, really expensive ones. But..."

"Oh," Lawrence mouthed. When he was out drinking with Holo, his head had been dulled by the wine. "I see now. Before it's made into clothing, skins are surprisingly cheap. But once they're

made into clothing, they won't sell—the money coming into the town will drop," he said.

The girl smiled beatifically like a saint with a humble supplicant before her, as if to say, "Well done."

With this, Lawrence could see the basic situation.

However, before he could take a step back and confirm all the details, the girl suddenly leaned forward across the table.

Softly clutching one of the copper coins to her breast, her expression shifted. "So far, you could hear this from any floozy in any tavern in town," she said, her words turning a bit vulgar as she looked at him through upturned eyes, chin tucked down. Lawrence tried to look at her, but her posture naturally drew his gaze to her slender, shapely collarbones.

The lass certainly understood how to press an intoxicated patron.

Lawrence reminded himself that this was about business.

"One must treat generous customers properly, after all," said the girl. "Let's keep what I'm about to tell you between the two of us, shall we?"

Lawrence nodded, pretending to be entirely taken in by the girl's actions.

"There's an eight- or nine-tenths chance that the merchants outside town will be banned from buying furs, though I'm sure the craftsmen and fur brokers will be angry."

"How do you know this?" Lawrence asked.

The girl only closed her mouth enticingly.

Lawrence's intuition told him that the girl's source of information was solid. It was likely that a member of the Council of Fifty was also a patron of the tavern, but she, of course, could not say so.

She did not even explain this fact since her statement had been nothing more than her talking to herself, and its veracity was impossible to gauge.

In a way, she might have been testing Lawrence, as otherwise she would hardly be letting slip such vital information.

"I'm a simple barmaid, so I care little for the price of furs, but merchants like you enjoy such things with your ale, do you not?"

"Aye, enough that we sometimes drink too much," said Lawrence with his best merchant's smile.

The girl smiled slightly, her eyes closing. "A good tavern sends all its patrons home drunk. I'd be pleased if you were among them."

"Well, I've drunk my wine, so I'm sure I'll feel it soon."

The girl opened her eyes.

The smile was on her lips, but it did not reach her eyes.

Lawrence was about to open his mouth to speak, but a voice from the kitchen called for the girl.

"Ah, it seems your food is ready," she said, standing from the chair and returning to the barmaid she'd been when Lawrence had first entered the tavern. "By the way, sir—," she said, looking over her shoulder before leaving the table.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a wife?"

Lawrence was taken momentarily aback at the unexpected question, but perhaps thanks to Holo constantly springing traps upon him, he was able to recover and reply. "My coin purse's strings are not tied. However... my reins are firmly held," he answered.

The girl grinned widely as though she were talking to a friend. "My but that's frustrating. I'm sure she's a fine person, too."

She seemed to have some pride in her ability to cajole her drunken male customers.

And even Lawrence might well have been drawn in easily had he not met Holo—or had he been a bit drunker.

But if he was to say so, it would be like rubbing salt in the poor girl's wounded pride.

"If you've the chance, do bring her by the tavern," she said.

"Aye," said Lawrence, and he mostly meant it.

A conversation between this girl and Holo would be a thing to see, though as a bystander, he might get sucked into something terrible.

"Wait just a moment, then. I'll go get your food."

"My thanks."

The girl headed back into the kitchen, her skirt fluttering again behind her.

Lawrence watched her go as he brought the cup of pear wine to his lips.

Even other people could tell, he realized, that Holo was very important to him.

Holding the hot, cloth-wrapped package of tail meat, Lawrence headed down the broad avenue that ran along the docks to take another look at the boats moored there.

With the new information from the barmaid, the scows did indeed seem a bit different.

Looking closely, Lawrence could see how straw or hempen cloth had been used to cover the goods piled high on the boats' decks, and many of the boats themselves were tied fast to the wharves, as though they did not expect to leave anytime soon. Some of them, of course, were merely passing the winter in town, but the number seemed a bit high for that to be the only explanation. At a wild guess, those were the boats that were carrying either furs or the materials needed to process furs.

The volume of fur transactions in Lenos was large enough that it was called the city of lumber and fur.

Being a mere traveling merchant, Lawrence could not easily estimate the total amount of fur traded in the town, but if a fur merchant were to buy up a single chest-high barrel of squirrel

pelts, that could easily come to 3,500, even 4,000 furs. The fact that such barrels were constantly rolling through the city made him feel practically faint.

What kind of profound impact would freezing the fur trade have on the town?

But he could understand Lenos's efforts to try to collect as much tax as they could, and the fact was that foreign merchants who bought only raw furs instead of clothing left many town craftsmen by the wayside. It was common knowledge that in any business, crafted, processed items made from raw materials had much better profit margins.

Nevertheless, with the northern campaigns canceled, the lack of travelers from the south meant there was absolutely no guarantee that there would be any way to turn such goods into coin.

Setting aside the quality of the furs and the quality of the tanning, there was any number of towns whose clothing craftsmanship was superior to Lenos's. To take the clothing that would normally have flown off the shelves as souvenirs and instead pay the shipping costs involved in exporting it to some other town would involve significant difficulty.

Lawrence felt that from the town's perspective, it would be better for them to decide to go ahead and sell fur to the waiting merchants, even if they had to overcome the craftsmen's resistance to do so.

At least that way they'd be able to get some coin for the furs. The reason so many merchants gathered in Lenos was because of the high quality furs that came through the town. Such furs would command a fair price.

But the barmaid had said that the Council of Fifty was going to prohibit fur purchasing.

Which left only a few possibilities.

To begin with, it was odd that the merchants were camped outside of the town.

Merchants would happily drive someone else to ruin if they had decided that it would bring a profit, so it was unimaginable that a large group of them would simply assemble and wait patiently.

There was clearly some other authority at work here.

But whether it was the giant tailor's guild headquartered in a town famous for its sartorial products far across the western sea or some dizzyingly massive company trying to monopolize the fur trade, Lawrence did not know.

Whatever the thing was, it wielded tremendous power.

And the minds that ran Lenos knew it, Lawrence determined, as he passed through the entrance of the docks and into the hustle and bustle.

The merchants outside the town were no doubt making their case.

"You'll be in a tough spot if you don't sell your furs," they would say. "Shall we buy them up for you? Though that alone will not avail you forever. Shall we come next year and the year after that?"

If Lenos swallowed this, it would become nothing more than a place where furs were gathered, then passed along. And once that happened, the consolidation of fur itself would eventually be taken over by some outsider and removed from the town.

However, the reason the townspeople didn't simply turn the merchants away wasn't just because of the craftsmen's opposition.

This problem didn't stop with the town; it would engulf the landed nobility to which the town was connected as well. When an economic problem turned political, the amount of money it took to solve it would jump by three, sometimes four digits.

This was a battle between titans, where the expectations of individual merchants were utterly meaningless.

Lawrence scratched his beard.

"The coin involved must be incredible," he said to himself. He

hadn't talked to himself in quite some time, and it felt good, like taking off shoes that had been worn for a week straight.

The bigger the amount of money in play, the bigger the leftovers might be.

And a merchant's alchemy allowed him to turn the complicated relationships between goods and people into a spring from which money would gush forth.

He pictured a sheet of yellowed parchment in his mind.

On it he drew sketch after sketch of the fur situation, and gradually the page became a treasure map.

So where was the treasure?

When he put the question to himself, licking his lips, his left hand reached the door of the inn room and opened it.

"..."

He had almost no memory of when he'd come all the way back to the inn, but that was not why he fell silent.

Holo, perhaps refreshed after a nap, had been grooming her tail, but she now hid it behind her back as she regarded him.

"...What's the matter?" asked Lawrence suddenly, after weathering a purposefully cautious look from an evidently now-sober Holo.

"I shan't abide it," she said.

"Huh?"

"I shan't abide my tail being sold," said Holo, letting a bit of her tail show from behind her, like a shy maiden peeking out from behind a tree, before she concealed it again.

Lawrence naturally understood.

His face had been consumed by his merchant self.

"I'm no hunter," he with a smile and a shrug as he entered the room, closing the door behind him and walking over to the desk.

"Oh no? You looked as though you were ready to sell anything you possibly could." Holo's glance fell but once upon the package Lawrence held, then came back to his face.

"Yes, well, I'm a merchant. I buy from one person to sell to another. It's a basic principle."

All merchants desired money, but when they forgot exactly what kind of merchant they were, that desire for money would run wild. When that happened, things like "trust" and "ethics" were nowhere to be found.

In their place was only avarice.

"So no, I will not be taking your tail from you. Though when summer comes, should you decide to shear some of your fur off, I'll happily collect and sell that," said Lawrence as he leaned against the desk.

Still sitting on the bed, Holo childishly stuck her tongue out at him before taking her tail in her hands again.

For Lawrence's part, he had no interest in seeing Holo's tail sans fur.

"Hmph. So what is that?" asked Holo, looking at the package Lawrence held in one hand as she nibbled at her tail.

"This? This is... indeed. If you can guess from scent alone what part of what animal this is from, I'll buy you as much of your favorite foods for dinner as you want."

"Oh ho." Holo's eyes flashed.

"I think there's some garlic in there... but you should be fine."

Lawrence came away from the desk and gave Holo the package, whereupon her expression turned immediately serious, and she sniffed the wrapped food carefully, looking for all the world like a wolf. This was nothing so rare in and of itself, but her manner was so charming that Lawrence couldn't help but stare.

Holo seemed to notice his gaze. She suddenly looked up at him, scowling.

She was comfortable being nude in front of him, but apparently this was a stare she could not abide.

Lawrence supposed that everyone had his or her idiosyn-

crasies. He obediently began to turn around but then stopped short.

"I'm sure no proud wisewolf would be thinking of sneaking a look inside the package while my back is turned," he said.

Holo's expression did not change, but the tip of her tail gave a sudden twitch.

Evidently he'd hit the bull's-eye.

He had to be careful; she had senses beyond those of ordinary humans.

Holo gave a theatrical sigh, then turned away, her mouth in a pout that Lawrence was sure had a tinge of guilt to it.

"So have you figured it out?"

"Patience," she said irritably, then sniffed the package again. Lawrence discreetly averted his eyes.

Presently the sound of a girl sniffing back tears echoed uncomfortably through the room.

Lawrence deliberately turned his attention to the clamor that filtered in through the room's window. It was a fine day, so sunlight also found its way through the window.

It was indeed cold, but having a room with a window was still a fine thing.

A warm, windowless room would have made Lawrence feel like he was hibernating in a cellar somewhere. Holo's judgment had been excellent.

"Well, now."

At the sound of her voice, Lawrence turned both his attention and his gaze back to Holo. "Have you figured it out?"

"Quite."

There were, of course, any number of animals whose meat was cooked and served. It was easy enough to tell them apart from their taste and texture, but what about by scent alone? Especially if it was something so rare and odd as the tail meat from a flat-tailed

rodent. Even if Holo knew of the existence of such a creature, the odds of her having eaten it were low.

Perhaps it was a bit mean-spirited, but Lawrence had offered her the freedom to eat whatever she liked for dinner in exchange.

"So what's the answer?" he asked, whereupon Holo regarded him with an angrier face than her positive answer had led him to expect.

"I must say it seems a bit unfair, given the conditions you proposed."

Lawrence shrugged. It seemed she didn't really know the answer after all.

"You should have said so in the first place," he said.

"I suppose so..." Holo gazed vaguely at the floor as though thinking something over.

It had been a simple bet, so even the clever Holo had no room to maneuver with her typical quibbles. The simplest contracts were always the strongest.

"So the answer?" Lawrence asked again. Holo's face suddenly showed total defeat. Though it was mean-spirited of him to think so, he couldn't help feeling but that he wanted to see this face a bit more often.

But it was only for a moment; just as that thought crossed Lawrence's mind, Holo's expression shifted to one of triumph.

"I don't know the name of the creature, but it's a large rodent tail, is it not?"

Lawrence had no words.

He was stunned.

"I told you it seemed a bit unfair," said Holo with a malicious giggle as she began to open the package.

"Y-you knew?"

"If you'd accused me of opening the package and sneaking a look, I was thinking of ordering so much food for dinner you'd break down in tears, but I suppose I shall show mercy."

The food within the cloth wrapping had been carefully rolled in strips of bark and tied with fine tendrils; it would be nearly impossible to peek inside without disturbing the contents.

And in any case, looking at the finished meal did not make the original form any easier to guess. Holo must have somehow been familiar with it.

"I'm a wisewolf, don't you forget it. There's nothing in this world I don't know," she said, flashing her fangs.

It was an obvious exaggeration, but her conviction was so strong that it was hard to dismiss.

As she undid the tendrils and removed the tree bark, steam rose up from the food. Holo narrowed her eyes in pleasure, wagging her tail.

"It's not quite accurate to say I knew," said Holo, mimicking Lawrence's tone. The meat had been cut into small slices, and as they were, there really was no way to discern their origin. Holo picked up one of the pieces, tilted her head back, and slowly lowered the bite into her open mouth. She closed her mouth and her eyes and chewed languorously.

It must have been delicious.

Yet there was something different about her manner.

"Mmph... yes, indeed," said Holo. Instead of her usual, hurried devouring of her food, which gave one the impression that she was worried it might be taken from her at any moment, Holo ate slowly, savoring the flavor as though it made her remember something. "The master of this inn said something like this, did he not?" she continued, licking the oil from her fingers and looking at Lawrence. "The months and years weather even stone buildings."

"To say nothing of memories," finished Lawrence

Holo nodded, satisfied. She then gave a small sigh and looked at the window, squinting a bit at the brightness. "Do you know what lingers longest in memory?"

Another strange question.

Was it a person's name? Numbers, figures? Images of one's home?

These notions appeared one after another in Lawrence's mind, but Holo's answer was completely different.

"'Tis scent, you know, that stays longer than all else."

Lawrence cocked his head in confusion.

"We forget things we've seen and heard so easily, but scents alone remain clear and distinct." Holo looked at the food and smiled.

Her smile was what seemed so upsettingly out of place to Lawrence; it was soft, almost nostalgic.

"I had no memory of this town," she continued. "To be quite honest, it was a bit worrisome."

"You weren't sure whether you really had ever come here?"

Holo nodded, and she seemed entirely truthful.

Now that he thought about it, Lawrence felt like he finally understood why Holo had been so constantly playful.

"But this food—I remember it vividly. It's such a strange creature after all, so even in the past, it was considered special. They'd put each one caught on a spit and roast them magnificently."

Holding the food in her hands like it was a favorite kitten sleeping on her lap, she looked up.

"I wondered if that's what you brought back, but when I smelled it, I nearly cried from the memories—and that was the turning point."

"So you did this on purpose?"

Now that he thought about it, the idea of Holo actually doing something so shallow as to sneak a look inside the package while his back was turned seemed a bit strange.

And when he looked away again, perhaps she had been crying a bit.

"Are you saying I'm the sort who would take advantage of another's goodwill?"

"You take advantage of me all the time," shot back Lawrence, and he saw Holo flashing her usual fanged grin.

"So then," said Holo, beckoning to Lawrence.

Harboring a bit of suspicion, he approached her guardedly until she grabbed his sleeve and pulled him in close.

"I shan't forget this scent, either."

He'd expected words along those lines.

But Lawrence found he could not manage his usual comeback as Holo had buried her face in his chest, unmoving.

She was no mere traveling companion.

He could look at her ears and tail and work his own form of mind reading on her.

"Nor will I," he replied, and with a soft sigh, he stroked her head with his hand.

Holo rubbed the corners of her eyes on his clothing and smiled awkwardly. "You sound a dunce when you say it so. I'll not forget that, either."

Lawrence gave a forced smile. "Sorry."

Holo smiled, rubbed her nose, then smiled again—and was back to her old self. "So it seems I have indeed visited this town."

"Then there must be legends of you left here."

He didn't add "in books somewhere," but Holo would certainly notice and appreciate his consideration.

On the other hand, if he didn't take such care, it would be impossible to avoid accidentally stepping on her tail.

"So then, what news did you manage to hear tell of?" asked Holo, like a mother asking her child to boast about some new knowledge he had acquired.

She never stayed frail for long.

"This time around is going to be a lot of fun," began Lawrence. Holo listened closely as she ate the tail meat.

In the end, they had two reasons to meet Rigolo, the town chronicler and secretary for the Council of Fifty.

The first was to ask if any legends of Holo remained and to have him show them the records where such legends might be found. The second was to discover the particulars of how the town came to be in the situation it presently faced.

The latter reason was purely a result of Lawrence's occupational sickness, and given the precedent set on their travels thus far, Holo listened to his explanation but was none too pleased.

In point of fact, if Lawrence had been asked whether it was really necessary to risk the danger involved in performing the financial alchemy it would take to suck money through the cracks in the current conflict, the answer was no—it was not. Given the profit he had managed to make in the pagan town of Kumersun, so long as he continued to quietly ply his trade for a while longer, the day when he would be able to open his own shop was not so very far off. In which case, he would do better to use his time frugally, carrying his goods and turning his profits, rather than to risk sticking his neck out in dangerous speculation. In the long term, spending his time in town quietly and carefully making business connections would be much better for Lawrence's future profits.

Not being a merchant, Holo didn't use terms like *future profits*, but her gist was the same: *You're not short on money, so relax.*

Simply standing there in the room was cold, so as they talked, Holo crawled into her bed and eventually started dozing off. Lawrence sat down on her bed as they spoke, and Holo had—with no particular intent—slowly grasped his hand in hers.

Having sat there on the bed and passed the time quietly talking, Lawrence had to admit that Holo was absolutely right. The fact

was, though, that no traveling merchant was so easygoing as to idle away his time in a town, particularly not while they were mid-journey.

He wanted her to understand that, but it was probably impossible.

It was perhaps fortunate, however, that Lawrence couldn't do anything immediately.

Given the situation in Lenos, none of the members of the Council of Fifty, including Rigolo, would casually meet with a foreign merchant.

Since the affair centered around the fur trade that was the town's lifeblood, meeting with a merchant of unknown background would be deeply suspicious and tantamount to societal suicide. No, Lawrence would not be able to see a council member.

Which meant that if he wanted to engage one, he would need a mediator.

Yet when Lawrence rethought the question of whether that would really be necessary, it was hard to convince himself of it. And if he were to force the issue and make a bad impression, they would never see the records of Holo.

Though outwardly Holo pressed Lawrence to hold back and not get involved, deep in her heart there was no question that given an opportunity to see those records, she would want to. He couldn't risk anything that would endanger their ability to do that. As he thought it through again and again, he eventually became aware of the sound of Holo's breathing as she slept.

When she was hungry, she ate, and when she was tired, she slept.

Indeed, she was as free as any beast, and those who spent their days constantly toiling to keep their bellies full had dreamed of such a life at least once.

Lawrence couldn't help but feel a bit jealous of the life Holo

took for granted. He extracted his hand from hers and lightly brushed her polished porcelain cheek with the back of his index finger. Once she had fallen asleep, even a tap wouldn't wake her. At Lawrence's touch, her expression clenched in irritation, but her eyes stayed closed as she buried her face in the blanket.

It was a quiet, happy moment. Nothing happened save for the passage of time itself, but this was one of the things Lawrence wished for when he drove his cart alone. The merchant knew this for a near certainty, and yet in the bottom of his heart, he felt a distinct impatience, a feeling that he was wasting this time.

He couldn't help feeling that if he wasn't making money or collecting information for his business, he was sustaining a loss he would never be able to recover.

The merchant's spirit is a flame that never goes out, his master had said, but that flame might very well have been hellfire, charring his flesh.

When one was alone, the flame provided warmth, but with two... with two, he felt it was too hot.

Holo's smile especially was very warm.

The world did not go as one wanted it to.

Lawrence stood up from the bed and paced around the room.

If he wasn't going to get involved in the happenings of Lenos, then he at least wanted to understand the details for his own enlightenment.

The best way to do that would be to meet directly with a member of the Council of Fifty, and in order to get unbiased information, a witness who didn't represent any particular interested party would be still more desirable.

It was the chronicler and secretary Rigolo who best fit that description.

But no council member would have any interest in meeting with an outsider.

The problem began to seem intractable.

Lawrence would have to take a different approach, but at the moment his sole source of information was the barmaid. Widening this to include more information from the town merchants would involve significant effort.

There was certainly any number of people using this machination or that to collect information, and Lawrence sincerely doubted that his own intellect and tactics would be enough to give him any advantage over the rest. Who knew how high the price for that information might rise given the scope of the demand?

Had it been a town where Lawrence had some old acquaintance, he might have been able to get nearer the essence of things and to make something happen. If it was goods you wanted, money could buy anything, but for information, you had to have trust.

In the face of this fascinating situation, Lawrence would just have to watch and wait.

Feeling like a frustrated dog pacing back and forth in a room while eyeing a piece of meat he could see through a tiny crack in the wall, Lawrence finally heaved a sigh.

He felt as if he was moving further and further away from the merchant he wished to be.

Even worse, the logic and prudence he should have long ago developed seemed to be gone. It was as though he had regressed to that period when he had just come of age; his head full of ridiculous get-rich-quick schemes.

His feet were restless.

He repeated the problem to himself, glancing at Holo.

Was it because this cheeky wolf girl was constantly pulling the rug out from under him?

It seemed possible.

He enjoyed talking with Holo too much.

That's why he had begun neglecting other things.

"..."

Lawrence stroked his beard, murmuring to himself that shifting the blame might not be a bad idea.

It was a wasted opportunity, but the fur problem would have to wait.

Which meant that the next action would be to seek out information that would set them on the road to Nyohhira, still farther north from Lenos.

If they were fortunate, the road would not yet have been rendered impassable with snow, and they would move forward.

Information on furs... can be collected after that, Lawrence told himself as he left the room.

Lawrence came down to the first floor where there was a rustling sound coming from the corner of the clutter-filled room.

There was neither lock nor lookout, but a good number of merchants still used this storehouse, it seemed.

The rate was not too high, and some used it as a relay for their peddling while others stored goods when their price fluctuated with the season. Lawrence would not have been surprised to learn that the odd smuggler or thief kept items there, too.

Though he heard the sound of someone tampering with goods in the storehouse, the person was in shadow, and Lawrence could not tell who it was. But Arold the innkeeper did not appear to think for one moment that one of his guests was opening someone else's luggage. He only poured a bit of water on the fire, which had grown slightly too strong.

"A road to the north?"

While Arold had reacted to Lawrence's question about chroniclers this morning as though a child had asked him a difficult theological question, he seemed to be much more used to this sort of inquiry.

He nodded slightly, as if to say, "Well, in that case," then paying the flame no heed, he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Not much snow this year. I don't know where you're headed, but I don't reckon it'll be too hard."

"I'm making for Nyohhira, as it happens."

Arold's left eyebrow went up, and the sharp blue eyes buried in the deep folds of his eyelids glittered.

Behind his merchant's smile, Lawrence flinched a bit, and Arold continued, brushing a bit of ash that had flown up when he poured water on the coals a moment earlier.

"Heading all the way into pagan country, eh?... Well, I suppose that's merchants for you, carrying money bags over their shoulder and heading off anywhere."

"Aye, and we throw them away on our deathbeds," Lawrence said, trying to lighten things up with the devout Arold, but the innkeeper only gave a derisive snort.

"So why bother earning it in the first place? Gaining it only to throw it away..."

It was something that many merchants pondered themselves.

But Lawrence had heard an interesting answer to this question. "You don't ask the same question when you clean a room, do you?"

If money was trash, then profit was the collection of trash.

A famous merchant in a southern country had repented on his deathbed, saying that collecting and throwing away the money that polluted the world God had given man was the ultimate virtue.

The clergy heard these words and were moved, but the merchants hid their uncertain smiles behind their wine cups—because the more successful one became, the less one's assets were concrete things, and the more they were numbers on certificates and entries in ledgers.

Thus if these written ledger entries and figures polluted the world, then the written teachings of God were no better, and so the irony was that those scriptures, too, should be thrown away for the betterment of the world—such was the view of most merchants.

Lawrence felt much the same way. He felt bad for Holo, but he would take the business of a successful merchant over prayers to gods that never answered any day.

"Heh," Arold chuckled. "Fair enough," he said in an uncommonly amused tone. His mood had improved.

He seemed more cheered by the irony behind Lawrence's words than by the words themselves.

"Are you leaving soon? I seem to recall you giving me a good amount of coin for your stay..."

"No, I expect to wait until the Council of Fifty has finished their meeting."

"...I see. You wanted to see Rigolo. You asked about a chronicler this morning, as I recall. That's a word I've not heard in some time. Hardly anyone looks to the past these days...," said Arold, narrowing his eyes as he stared off into space.

Perhaps the old man was looking back on his life thus far.

But his gaze soon snapped back to Lawrence. "Well, if you're heading north, 'twould be better to leave sooner. Your horse should be able to get you part of the way, but beyond that... you'd want a longhair and a sleigh. If you're in a hurry, that is."

"There was a longhair in the stable, wasn't there?"

"Aye, its master is a man from the north. I reckon he knows the route quite well."

"His name?" Lawrence asked.

Arold looked surprised for the first time. It was strangely charming. "Huh. He's been coming here for some time, but I've never asked his name. He's fatter every year, too. It's quite clear in my mind. Strange... I suppose these things happen..."

What sort of inn lacked even a guest register?

"He's a fur merchant from the north," Arold continued. "He's all over town at the moment... but if I see him, I'll pass your questions on."

"I'd be very grateful."

"Aye. But if you keep waiting for the Council of Fifty to finish, you're liable to be here 'til spring," said Arold, putting the cup of mulled wine to his lips for the first time.

This was the first time Lawrence had seen Arold so loquacious. He must have been in excellent spirits, Lawrence guessed.

"Will the meeting take so long?" Lawrence asked, pressing for more information.

Arold's face turned unreadable, and he fell silent. *No doubt the best response if he hoped to live out his remaining years in peace,* Lawrence thought.

Lawrence was about to offer his thanks as a way of ending the conversation, but Arold then spoke, cutting him off.

"People's lives tend up and down, and so do the towns that they live in. After all, those towns are just groups of people." The words of a man who had retired from an active life.

But Lawrence was still young. "It's in people's nature to resist fate, I think. Just like how we seek forgiveness after making a mistake."

Arold regarded Lawrence wordlessly with his blue eyes.

There was anger in his gaze and scorn.

But Lawrence liked the old man when he was like this, so he stood his ground.

Arold chuckled. "It's hard to argue with that... It's been pleasant talking with you. This is your third time at the inn, yes? What's your name?"

Though he had never asked the name of the fur merchant who had long made use of his inn, Arold now asked Lawrence his name.

He wasn't asking as the innkeeper, but rather as a craftsman.

When a craftsman asked the name of a customer, it was a mark of trust that they would complete the customer's order, no matter how difficult the request.

Evidently this old tannery boss liked Lawrence for some reason.

"Kraft Lawrence," said Lawrence, extending his hand.

"Kraft Lawrence, eh? I'm Arold Ecklund. In the old days, I'd make you some fine leather strap work, but these days all I can offer is a quiet night."

"That's more than enough," said Lawrence, which Arold smiled at for the first time, showing a broken tooth.

Lawrence was about to leave when Arold's gaze fell on something behind his lodger. Lawrence turned to look and did not expect the person he saw there.

It was the merchant Holo had earlier claimed was a woman, still wearing the same robes and carrying a burlap sack in her left hand. She must have been the one Lawrence heard rustling around in the storeroom earlier.

"You didn't ask me until my fifth visit. You ask him his name so soon, Mr. Arold?" came the hoarse voice. If Holo hadn't told him otherwise, Lawrence still would have assumed she was male, an apprentice merchant just starting out.

"That's because I didn't talk with you until the fifth visit," said Arold, glancing at Lawrence before continuing. "And it's so rare that you open that mouth of yours. Are you as sociable as I am, then?"

"Perhaps," said the woman, and a smile quirked beneath her cowl. Lawrence noticed that she didn't just happen to have an especially thin beard for a man—no, definitely a woman.

"You there," she said, looking pointedly at Lawrence.

"Yes?"

"We should talk. You have business with Rigolo?"

If Lawrence had been Holo, his ears would have twitched. "Yes," he answered, confident enough that not a single hair of his beard had so much as moved.

At the mention of Rigolo's name, Arold turned away and reached for his wine cup. That was the effect that a merchant had these days when mentioning the name of one of the Council of Fifty.

"Shall we go upstairs?"

The woman pointed up. Lawrence had no objections and nodded.

"I'll take this," she said, grabbing a pitcher from behind Arold's chair, then heading immediately up the stairs. Though they were not related, she seemed to know Arold quite well—so what was their connection?

Lawrence's mind was full of questions, but Arold's face had returned to its normal, unsociable mien.

He took his leave and followed the woman up the stairs.

There was nobody on the second floor, and the woman immediately bent her knees and sat down cross-legged in front of the fireplace. Her manner was that of someone used to sitting and standing in cramped places. If Lawrence had been a money changer, he would have figured her for a comrade-in-business.

She certainly wasn't someone who had started out in business just yesterday.

"Ha, I knew it. This wine is too good to waste by drinking it warm," she said after sampling the contents of the pitcher she had brought up.

Lawrence sat down as well, wondering why the woman was suddenly so sociable, whether her behavior was genuine, and if it wasn't genuine, what her goal could possibly be.

After taking a couple of drinks from the wine pitcher, the merchant woman thrust it toward Lawrence. "You seem like you've got your guard well up. Can I ask why?"

While her cowl covered her face, obscuring her expressions from Lawrence, evidently she could see his face perfectly well.

"I'm a traveling merchant who does a lot of business with people I'll never see again. I suppose it's a habit," he said, taking a sip of the proffered wine. It was indeed good.

The merchant woman looked at him evenly past her cowl.

Lawrence gave a pained grin and confessed, "Female merchants are rare. If one calls me over, I can't help but be on my guard a bit."

He could tell that she was momentarily disturbed at his statement.

"...It's been years since anyone figured that out."

"We passed this morning in front of the inn. My companion has the keen senses of a beast, you see."

She was part beast, in truth, and if Holo had not been there, Lawrence would never have noticed the merchant was a woman.

"One shouldn't underestimate a woman's intuition. Though I suppose I'm not one to talk."

"I learn that lesson every day."

Lawrence wasn't sure if she smiled or not, but in any case, the woman put her hand to her neck and loosened the string that held her cowl in place; then with a practiced hand, she drew it back and off her head.

He watched her with a bit more anticipation than was polite. *What intrepid visage might emerge?* When he saw her face, Lawrence was not at all confident that he had been able to perfectly conceal his surprise.

"Name's Fleur Bolan. But Fleur's not much for intimidation, so I go by Eve."

The woman, Fleur—or Eve—was young.

But she was not so young that youth was her only virtue. She was old enough to be polished and refined, making her all the more beautiful. At a guess, Lawrence would have put her at about his own age.

Her eyes weren't just blue; they seemed forged from blue steel.

Her hair was short and blond. If she smiled, she would look like an uncommonly beautiful boy.

And when she wasn't smiling, she looked like a wolf—a wolf that would bite your finger off if you tried to touch it.

"I'm Kraft Lawrence."

"Kraft? Or Lawrence?"

"In business, Lawrence."

"Call me Eve. I'm none too fond of Bolan, and I know all too well how I look to men when I wear makeup and a wig, and I don't like that sort of compliment, either."

His initiative stolen, Lawrence was silent for a moment.

"I'd planned to hide it, if I could," she continued.

It surely being the fact of her sex.

Not wanting to be discovered by anyone else, she replaced the cowl on her head and fixed it again with the tie.

In his mind, Lawrence couldn't help picturing a knife wrapped in cotton.

"I'm really not a particularly retiring person. If anything, I'm talkative and quite courteous, if I do say so myself."

For whatever reason, Eve was now being open and garrulous, so Lawrence matched her small talk.

She was a woman, yes, but hardly some sheltered princess. He had little reason to be nervous.

"You're an interesting fellow. I can see why the old man likes you," said Eve.

"Nice of you to say so. But I've only exchanged the briefest of pleasantries with you, so I've no idea why you would be interested in me."



"Merchants don't get infatuated that easily, so unfortunately—not quite. But you're no fool, you know this. Anyway, the reason I talked to you is simple. I just wanted someone to talk to."

Judging by the features on the face beneath the cowl, something about her reminded Lawrence of Holo, despite Eve's slightly crude manners.

If he wasn't careful, she'd pull the rug out from under him, just like Holo.

"And the reason you chose me for that particular honor is...?"

"One reason would be the fact that old Arold likes you. He's got a good eye for people. Another reason would be your companion, the one who saw through my disguise."

"My companion?"

"Yes. Your companion. A girl, yes?"

If she had called Holo a boy, it would've been exactly the kind of story some wealthy libertine nobleman would love.

But Lawrence understood what Eve was trying to say.

If he was traveling with a woman, he would be a safe person to talk to.

"It's one thing when I'm negotiating, but hiding the fact that I'm a woman while making chitchat is no easy thing. I know I'm unusual. And it's not like I don't understand why someone would want me to take off the cowl sometimes," said Eve.

"This is going to sound like a compliment, but if you were to take it off while you were drinking with some fellow merchants, I'm sure they'd love it."

Eve smiled with a lopsided smirk, and even that was an impressive gesture. "Like I said, I think about who I can chat with, and in the end, you need to be either an old geezer or with a woman."

Female merchants were rarer than fairies. Lawrence couldn't even begin to imagine her day-to-day worries.

"You don't see merchants traveling with women very often.

Clergy, perhaps, or the odd artisan or minstrel couple. But none of them have anything interesting to say to a merchant like me."

Lawrence smiled a bit. "Well, there are quite a few circumstances around my companion."

"And I won't be nosy. The two of you seem used to travel and don't seem connected by money, so I figured you'd be safe to talk to. That's all."

Eve finished talking and held her hand out for the pitcher.

It wasn't polite to hang onto a pitcher of wine that was being passed around in lieu of a cup, so Lawrence apologized and handed it back.

"Anyway, that's about the size of it, but you can't just walk up to somebody and say, 'Hey, how about a chat?' That's why I mentioned Rigolo's name, but it wasn't just talk. You want to see him, right?"

Eve looked at Lawrence from underneath her cowl, but he couldn't read her expression at all. She was clearly an excellent negotiator.

This hardly seemed like small talk to Lawrence. He answered carefully. "Yes, as soon as I can."

"Might I ask why?"

Lawrence could not imagine why she would want to know this.

It may have been simple curiosity or she wanted to use that knowledge somehow or she was testing Lawrence based on his response to being asked such a question.

If Holo had been with him, he would have had an advantage, but as it was, he felt like he was being cornered.

The situation was frustrating, but he would have to go on the defensive.

"I've heard Rigolo is the town's chronicler. I'd like to ask him to let me see any of the old tales of Lenos."

The subject of fur was too delicate to broach. As long as he

couldn't see Eve's expression, it was dangerous to bring up. He had no cloak to hide behind, so it would be easy for her to see if he was being too guarded.

Nonetheless, Eve seemed to detect a certain truth to Lawrence's words. "Now that's a strange reason. And here I was sure you'd want information on the fur trade."

"Well, I am a merchant, so I wouldn't pass that information up if I could get it. But it's dangerous, and my companion doesn't wish it." Lawrence couldn't help but feel that trying any ham-fisted trickery in front of Eve would get him burned.

"It's true that the man's study is piled high with volumes passed down over the generations. His dream is to be able to spend his days reading them, I hear. He's always going on about how he wants to resign his position as secretary to the Council of Fifty."

"Is that so?"

"Quite. He's not a very sociable fellow to begin with, but his position means he knows all the ins and outs of the council, so there's no end of people trying to cozy up to him. If you tried to just go and see him now, he'd give you the evil eye and send you away at the gate."

Admirably, Lawrence managed a neutral "I see," but he doubted that Eve thought he was as neutral as he tried to seem.

Eve was, after all, hinting that she would be able to introduce Lawrence to Rigolo.

"Oh, indeed. So if that's what you're interested in, I do quite a bit of trade with the church here. Rigolo normally works as a scribe for the church, you see. I've known him for some time."

Lawrence did not question her.

If he was to do so, there was the danger that he would reveal his own motivations, which she would easily be able to see.

So he spoke the plain truth.

"It would certainly be of great help to me if you could arrange for me to see those records," Lawrence said.

The corner of Eve's mouth might have quirked for just a moment, but perhaps it was just his imagination.

She seemed to be enjoying something about this exchange.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I trade in?"

"You didn't inquire after the occupation of my companion so I'll extend you the same courtesy."

This conversation made Lawrence nervous in a way entirely different from his exchanges with Holo.

And yet this is fun, he thought to himself, which is why when a chuckle echoed through the room, he didn't realize it wasn't from him for a moment.

"Heh-heh-heh. Excellent. Excellent indeed! More than a few times have I hoped to meet a young merchant with a female companion, but I'm truly glad I spoke up, Lawrence! I don't know whether you're as remarkable as you seem, but you're surely not some two-copper peddler."

"I'm honored by your compliments, but I'd ask you to wait a moment before shaking my hand."

Eve grinned.

Her smile reminded him so much of a certain someone that he half expected to see sharp canines bared.

"I know you're not some sweaty-palmed fool," said Eve. "Your face has been unreadable from the start. I can see why old man Arold likes you."

Lawrence accepted the flattery. "Well then, instead of asking what it is you deal in, might I ask a different question?"

Eve still smiled, but Lawrence was quite sure her smile did not reach her eyes.

"And what might that be?"

"How much will your introduction fee be?" Lawrence dropped a pebble into the dark and bottomless well.

How deep was it? And was there water in the bottom?

Presently the sound echoed back to him.

"I'll ask for neither coin nor goods."

Lawrence wondered if she was thirsty, but she offered him the pitcher as she continued.

"All I ask is that you chat with me."

The wetly sentimental echo had returned.

Lawrence wiped his face clean of any emotion as he coolly regarded Eve and her statement.

Eve chuckled and shrugged. "You're good. But no, it's not a lie. It's only natural you'd think it strange, but someone I can talk to without hiding the fact that I'm a woman—and a merchant, to boot—is worth more than *limar* gold."

"But less than *lumione*?"

Her reaction to some teasing would reveal the depth of her character.

Eve seemed to know this. "I'm a merchant. In the end, money is what matters most," she replied with an even smile.

Lawrence laughed.

With someone like this to talk to, he could easily chat all night.

"But I don't know what sort your companion is. I prefer my conversations uninterrupted. A sulky companion spoils the wine."

Lawrence searched his memory. Was Holo the sort to be jealous over such things?

He felt like she had been somewhat irritated by Norah the shepherdess, but had that not been because of her profession?

"I don't think that will be a problem."

"Oh? Nothing is more mysterious than the heart of a woman. I myself don't understand a whit of what they talk about."

Lawrence opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it.

Eve chuckled. "Still, I'm here for business. I can't afford to waste time, but if we get along, then I'd be pleased to have your acquaintance. I may look harsh—"

"—But you're actually talkative and sociable, right?"

At Lawrence's counterattack, Eve laughed, her shoulders shaking with girlish delight despite her low, hoarse voice. "Ha, quite right."

Her words were casual, but they had the tone of sincerity.

Lawrence had no notion of how a single woman would come to tread the path of the merchant, but any woman who could swim in the whirlpools of avarice that made up the mercantile world was a force to be reckoned with. No doubt she avoided casual conversation out of simple self-defense.

He took a drink of wine from the pitcher, then stood and headed for the stairs to the third floor. "Well, so long as my companion isn't jealous," he said.

"That's a terrible condition, indeed."

The two merchants smiled wordlessly at each other.

The council meeting would end shortly before nightfall. Eve had business to attend to and could not accompany Lawrence and Holo, but she went on ahead to speak to Rigolo's family on their behalf.

So after taking a moderate recess after midday, Lawrence and Holo left the inn.

Rigolo's house was apparently slightly north of the center of town.

That particular district seemed relatively wealthy, given the stone foundations and ground floors of the buildings there, but the ambience was nonetheless poor. Many houses had been repeatedly expanded with carpentry, and their walls jutted into the street, almost meeting overhead.

The area seemed to have once been a wealthy neighborhood but had declined over time.

While families who had been prosperous for generations knew

that money did not always bring happiness, the nouveau riche were different. So long as they had money, they wished to flaunt it by expanding their homes.

That was all fine and good, but those expansions ruined the atmosphere of the neighborhood. Stray dogs and beggars began to wander the ever-dim streets.

When that happened, the truly wealthy moved elsewhere, and the value of homes in the area fell, and with that value went the quality of the neighborhood. Once it had been mostly moneylenders and masters of middling trade companies that lived here, but now the area was populated by apprentice craftsmen and market stall owners.

"Quite a cramped street this," said Holo.

Perhaps owing to the weight of the buildings on either side of it, the street was warped and buckled, and here and there cobblestones were missing, perhaps having been pried free and sold off by someone hurting for money. Water would then pool in the holes left behind, contributing to the feeling of general disrepair, an impression that the narrowness of the lane only heightened.

Lawrence couldn't walk side by side with Holo, and if someone was to come the other way, they would have to flatten themselves against the wall in order to pass.

"I'll admit it's inconvenient," Lawrence said, "but I like this kind of disorderly place."

"Oh ho."

"You can really feel how it comes out of years and years of change. Just like a beat-up old tool that gradually takes on a different shape over time, turning into something unique."

Lawrence looked back at Holo who walked behind him. She traced her fingers along the walls as she followed.

"Like the way a river changes shape?"

"...I'm sorry to say I don't follow your comparison."

"Mm. In that case...like the way the heart changes shape. The soul, is it called?"

Holo's example was so much closer to home that Lawrence was a bit sluggish to keep up. "I suppose so," he finally answered. "If we could take it out and get a look at it, I imagine that's what it would look like. The heart becomes scratched and dented and repaired over time, and with one glance, you'd be able to tell your own from others."

As Lawrence and Holo walked, they encountered one of the large puddles that dotted the lane. Lawrence crossed with a single bound first, then turned and extended his hand to Holo.

"Milady," he said with courtesy. Holo offered her hand with exaggerated magnanimity in reply, hopping over the puddle to land next to Lawrence.

"And what would your soul look like, eh?" she asked.

"Mm?"

"No doubt it would be tinged with my color."

Lawrence no longer flinched at the chestnut-red eyes that looked up at him.

Their effect on him was indeed fading.

Lawrence shrugged and resumed walking. "I'd say *poisoned* is a better word than *colored*."

"Then 'tis a potent poison, indeed," said Holo over her shoulder haughtily as she ran ahead. "After all, my smile still knocks you right over."

"So what color is your soul?" shot back Lawrence, still and always impressed with her wit.

"What color?" Holo repeated, then looked ahead as if pondering the matter. She slowed for a moment, and Lawrence caught up to her from behind. The street was too narrow for him to pass, so he simply peered down at her.

She muttered, apparently counting something on her fingers.

"Hmm," she intoned. She then noticed Lawrence looking over her shoulder and tilted her head up, leaning back into him a bit. "There are many."

"...Oh."

For a moment, Lawrence didn't follow her meaning, but then he understood that she was referring to the history of her romances.

Holo had lived for centuries, so it stood to reason that she would have experienced love once or twice. Given her clever wit, no doubt some of her partners had been human.

With Holo blocking the path ahead, Lawrence lightly pushed her small back, urging her forward.

Holo obediently began to walk.

They usually walked side by side, so Lawrence had few opportunities to see her form from behind. It was strangely novel.

Seen from behind, she was slender, the lines of her body lovely even through the thick clothes she wore. Her strides were neither too long nor too quick; the word *graceful* came to Lawrence's mind. There was also something lonely about her form, something soft when embraced.

Is this what is was to feel protective? Lawrence wondered with a self-deprecating smile but was suddenly filled with doubt.

Holo had ticked the numbers off on her fingers, but just how many men had held her slender shoulders?

He wondered what her expression had been like. Had she been pleased? Had she narrowed her eyes, being coy? Or had her ears twitched and her tail swished to and fro as she was unable to conceal her happiness?

They had held hands, embraced...Holo was not a child, after all...

Who else has she had? Lawrence thought to himself.

"..."

As soon as the thought appeared in his mind, he hurried to dismiss it. An awful tongue of flame reached up from the depths of his heart.

His chest pounded as though he had fallen from a cliff. The shock was like touching a hot coal, thinking the fire had gone out, only to be badly burned.

She had counted them off on her fingers.

It was the most obvious thing in the world, but as she ticked off each finger in his imagination, something deep in him collapsed, leaving only a smoldering anger.

The feeling was unmistakable.

It was the blackest jealousy.

Lawrence was annoyed with himself. It was incredibly selfish of him, even if he had been born to the avarice that leads one to take on the occupation of merchant.

But the love of money was nothing compared to this feeling.

So it was that when Holo turned to him with accusation in her eyes, this had a deeper effect on him than any clergyman's sermon ever could.

"So, have you finished your introspection?"

"...You see through just about everything, don't you?" he answered wearily.

His heart felt so heavy it made him want to sit and rest.

But surprisingly, Holo smiled, showing her sharp canines. "I'm no better myself, though."

"..."

"You simply sounded so happy, so desperately happy, to speak with someone without so much as a hint of charm—"

In that instant, Holo's face turned angry.

He had seen her angry face any number of times before, but this one had a particularly savage edge to it.

She is a wisewolf, Lawrence reminded himself.

"Would it make sense if I said I enjoyed it as a merchant?" he asked, trying to offer an excuse.

Holo stopped, then started walking again once Lawrence had closed the gap between them.

"Do you want me to ask you which is more important—money or me?"

That line was among the top three things that a lonely traveling merchant would dream of hearing from a woman.

And it was a problem that would cause any merchant to tear his heart out in frustration.

Lawrence raised both hands in defeat.

"To be sure, the reason I would be angry is not one whit different from what you're thinking. 'Tis an utterly selfish, childish notion. But the two of us have our wits; we can speak of this. Thus, I am not angry."

"..."

Holo was a wisewolf of long experience.

Lawrence could not hope to cross swords with her.

For a while, he searched his small vocabulary for some suitable response but found nothing. "What I'm thinking is that it's not fair of me."

"Truly?"

Lies were hopeless against Holo.

"Truly."

She did not turn around at his answer.

He was not certain that it had been the right one.

Holo continued to walk quietly, gracefully, finally coming to a fork in the road. According to the directions they had received from Eve, they needed to bear right.

Lawrence didn't feel good about it, but since Holo had stopped, he spoke up.

"We head right here."

"Mm." Holo turned to face him. "So this is the fork in the road."

Lawrence did not ask which road was forking.

Evidently that had been the first barrier. Holo's right eyebrow moved slightly.

"How do you resolve your selfish jealousy toward me?"

Was she now asking questions that sounded like they had come from some clergyman of the Church?

Outwardly the right thing to do was to lose this black, selfish feeling, but inwardly Lawrence knew it would not disappear so easily.

He looked back at Holo, a bitter expression on his face.

This was Holo the Wisewolf. He could not imagine that she would corner him with questions like this for no good reason.

In other words, even if the answer was wrong for nearly everyone, there was something that would be correct for Holo.

But how to reach it?

Lawrence's mind raced.

Holo had said just a moment ago that she was the same as him.

So the answer, he reasoned, must be within Holo as he saw her.

The most difficult problem for him might be the easiest thing in the world for someone else to solve.

Holo was also having trouble dealing with her jealousy.

And Holo herself wanted to know how to resolve it, did she not?

So given that, all Lawrence needed to do was consider the problem from the outside, and the answer would come naturally.

He opened his mouth to speak and saw Holo steady herself in preparation. "My answer is that there is no way to resolve it."

It was a single ripple in the smooth surface of a lake.

He tossed another pebble into that lake, trying to bring expression back to Holo's face.

"And it makes you hate yourself."

Neither defiance nor selflessness was the correct response, he thought.

If he imagined that Holo was the jealous one rather than himself, it was the most natural thing in the world, and it was actually quite nice to be the object of that jealousy.

After all, jealousy was nothing more than wanting to have someone all to yourself, so how could it be anything but flattering as long as it wasn't excessive?

Hence Lawrence's answer, but Holo still remained expressionless.

Lawrence did not look away. He was certain this was the final barrier.

"Hmph. So we bear right, do we?" she said with a smile, cocking her head. At this, Lawrence couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. "Still," she added, giggling.

"What?"

"Jealousy and self-hatred, eh? Indeed," said Holo with a smirk.

This struck him as rather unnatural, and by the time he started walking down the right-hand path, he had fallen behind Holo.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked, grinning over her shoulder.

If Lawrence had really managed to produce an answer that satisfied her, Holo shouldn't have been smirking like this. He'd anticipated either a smile of happy relief or an out-and-out scowl.

So what did this mischievous smile portend?

Lawrence felt his face flushing. He had turned red so many times that day that he began to worry the color would stick.

Holo giggled. "Have you figured it out, then?" she inquired over her shoulder. "You agonized over the problem, reversed the positions in your head, and arrived at the answer. 'Twas plain as day on your face. But if you'd thought about it a bit, you'd see. When someone comes to you for advice, the answer you think is correct is what you want him or her to be. Which means?"

Indeed.

Holo had not been waiting for Lawrence's words to solve her problems.

She had, in fact, been waiting for him to reveal his own feelings.

"You become jealous and agonize over it. Is that what you wish from me, so that you can play the role of offering your hand in consolation? Should I now collapse into charming tears of self-recrimination, pathetically clinging to the hand you so generously offer?"

"Urgh—"

So this was what it was like to have one's heart laid bare.

He felt like a shamed maiden, covering her face with her hands.

The sharp-fanged wolf glided smoothly to his side.

And yet there was some solace in seeing that Holo did this not simply for her own enjoyment.

Even Lawrence could tell that much.

Holo had been truly jealous about his enjoyable chat with Eve, and this conversation was something of a diversion.

"Hmph. Come, let's go," Holo said, perhaps reading Lawrence's unguarded expression. "We can leave it at this," she seemed to be saying.

Surely her mood had improved with all of this, and she would probably be more generous about him enjoying the odd merchant-to-merchant chat with Eve.

Lawrence couldn't help feeling that he had been careless, though.

He had allowed his deepest wishes to be hauled out for all to see.

"So then," said Holo beside him, her tone completely casual. The atmosphere was still poor, but the street had widened enough for the two of them to walk side by side. "In truth, I'm asking you this simply because I want to tease you, but..."

Even given a warning like this, Lawrence felt like a hare waiting for the slaughter.

"Do you want to know how many I counted off?"

Her pure, innocent smile came down upon him like a giant meat cleaver.

"I've been reminded just how small and fragile my own heart is" was all the battered Lawrence could manage, but this seemed to satisfy Holo.

Sadistic satisfaction was written large all over her face as she clung to his arm. "Well, I have to get my claws into that fragile heart of yours before it freezes solid."

Lawrence looked down at her, unable to manage any sort of response.

Unbelievably, her smiling face was like that of a winsome girl, pleased at her own mischief.

But even the worst nightmare eventually comes to an end.

Once they found the house that Eve had described to Lawrence with the green copper signboard cut in the shape of a three-legged chicken, Holo abandoned her harassment.

"Well then," said Lawrence to break the silence, his tone strangely light after the frustrating, embarrassing conversation that had preceded it. "I'm told this Rigolo is a difficult character, so let's be careful."

Holo nodded her assent as she walked alongside him, still holding on to his arm. "I suppose this ends our lovely, dreamlike exchange. We're now back to boring reality."

Lawrence had no idea exactly how serious this murmured statement was. "In that case, feel free to go back to the inn and sleep," he shot back under his breath.

"Mm... that might be nice. Of course, it wouldn't be sheep that I count as I fall asleep..."

Holo still held the upper hand when it came to being nasty.

But now that the subject had come up, Lawrence felt strangely emboldened. "Oh? So how many men have there been?"

He didn't want to know every detail, but it would also be a lie to say he was totally uninterested.

She had randomly brought the subject up, after all, so the answer might well have been zero.

To suggest that some part of him didn't hope that was true would also be a lie.

But Holo said nothing in response to the question. Her expression was blank, and she didn't so much as tremble. This made her look like a perfect, untouched doll.

Once he realized it was an act, Lawrence knew he couldn't win.

"Men are fools, and I am their king," he finally said. Holo came back to life and seemed quite tickled. Lawrence slumped in defeat, smiling.

The three-legged chicken that hung from the eaves of the Rigolo house was carved in the image of the chicken that had long ago predicted the flooding of the Roam River, which flowed by Lenos.

The Church claimed it was a messenger from God, but according to the tale, the flood had been predicted by the position of the stars, moon, and sun—in other words, by the astronomical records of the time.

Ever since, the three-legged chicken had become a symbol of wisdom.

Perhaps the Rigolo family, who had apparently served as chroniclers for ages, hoped that the monotonous records they kept would one day act as guideposts, pointing the way to the future.

Lawrence rapped on the door using the silver-plated knocker, clearing his throat.

Their introduction from Eve should have already arrived, but even Eve, whose negotiation skills were considerable, claimed that

Rigolo was a tough nut to crack. Lawrence couldn't help feeling nervous.

Behind him, Holo had neglected to continue holding his hand, but her presence was embarrassingly reassuring.

It was possible that he hadn't been overwhelmed by Eve earlier precisely because he'd met Holo and it was her companionship that enabled him to think this way. Before meeting Holo, the only person Lawrence had been able to count on was himself. He had been filled with both a burning desire to win and a terrible fear of losing.

Was it better or worse to have friends to count on? Just as Lawrence considered this question, the door slowly opened.

That moment—the instant between the opening of the door to the point where he could see the person's face—was the most nerve-racking of all.

And as the door swung wide, an aged, bearded old man—

—did not stand behind it.

"May I ask who is calling?"

Lawrence was surprised by the figure that opened the door, but it was not a nervous surprise.

She couldn't have been more than twenty, head covered all the way to her alabaster brow in the delicate cloth of a simple black habit. She was a nun.

"I believe Eve Bolan explained that we were coming."

"Ah, we have been expecting you. Do come in."

Lawrence purposefully avoided introducing himself, but this nun was either a particularly nice person, or Eve was a particularly trusted person.

Unable to know which was the truth, Lawrence did as he was bidden, entering the house with Holo behind him.

"Please feel free to sit and wait here."

Upon entering the house, they immediately found themselves in a sitting room with a faded carpet on the floor.

None of the age-faded furnishings were particularly grand, and they spoke clearly of the house's master's long tenure in the area.

The first chronicler Lawrence had ever met was Diana in the pagan town of Kumersun, so he had expected this place to be as cluttered as Diana's was—but no, it was surprisingly tidy.

Instead of books crammed into every shelf, there were stuffed toys and works of embroidery, along with a small statue of the Holy Mother that a girl would be able to carry easily. Beside the statue hung bulbs of garlic and onion. The only things that suggested this house belonged to a chronicler were the quill pens and ink bottles and a small, sand-filled chest used for drying inked pages, along with parchments and bundles of paper tucked away in unobtrusive corners.

Holo gazed around the room, her expression of mild surprise suggesting that she'd had similar expectations.

In the first place, one hardly expected to see a nun, who looked ready to head out on a pilgrimage, in a house like this—though the statue of the Holy Mother and the relief of the three-legged chicken suggested a household of both financial security and deep faith.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," said the nun when she returned.

Having heard tales of Rigolo's bad disposition from Eve, Lawrence was prepared to be kept waiting because of this or that imagined fault, but it seemed they would be able to meet him with unexpected ease.

Led by the nun with her soft smile and warm, homey manner, Lawrence and Holo continued from the sitting room down a hallway to a room deeper within the house.

Holo herself did not look completely unlike a nun, but a true nun's graceful effect came from a different source. Of course, if Holo knew he was thinking this she would give him an earful,

Lawrence thought—and immediately afterward, she stomped on his foot.

No doubt she had simply been waiting for a good opportunity, but Lawrence couldn't help feeling as though she'd undone the buttons to his heart and peered about within it.

"Mr. Rigolo, we're coming in."

The nun knocked on the door as though delicately cracking an egg. There was no telling what color the yolk would be, though.

Lawrence cleared his head, and once the door opened at a muffled reply that came from within, they entered the room.

Immediately thereafter, it was Holo who, impressed, uttered a quiet "huh."

Lawrence was even more impressed and could find no words at all.

"My, what a delightful reaction! Melta, look; they are impressed!"

The nun called Melta smiled her clear, bell-like smile at the young, forceful voice that echoed throughout the room.

The room on the other side of the door was indeed every bit as cluttered as Diana's had been.

However, perhaps this could be called a calculated clutter, for beyond the stacks of books directly in front of them and the wooden bird model that hung from the ceiling was a wall made of floor-to-ceiling glass, through which sunlight flooded, revealing a verdant garden beyond. It was like being inside a cave and looking through the exit at the world beyond.

"Ha-ha-ha, impressive, is it not? With enough effort, I can keep it green year round," said a young, chestnut-haired man with a proud laugh as he emerged. He wore a collared, tailored shirt and pants without so much as a single wrinkle, fit for any noble. "Fleur told me of you—said that there were some people with a strange request to make of me."

"...Er, yes...uh, Lawrence—I mean, my name is Kraft Lawrence," said Lawrence, finally coming to his senses and taking the hand that Rigolo offered, though he couldn't pull his eyes from the magnificent garden.

It was totally invisible from any of the surrounding streets—a perfect secret garden.

The hackneyed phrase appeared in his head, and he couldn't shake it.

"My name is Rigolo Dedly. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise, I'm sure."

Rigolo's gaze fell next to Holo. "Ah, this must be the companion..."

"Name's Holo."

Not only was Holo hardly the bashful type, but also upon a first meeting, she instantly knew how to act in order to make a good impression on whomever she wished.

Far from being irritated with her high-handed self-introduction, Rigolo clapped his hands in delight, then extended one to her in greeting.

"Well then! That's it for introductions, and I've already gotten you to compliment my garden, so I'm quite satisfied. Was there something I could do for you by way of thanks, then?"

Some merchants had terrifying personalities concealed by pleasant facades, and Lawrence was not yet sure Rigolo was not similar.

Melta simply smiled as she thoughtfully brought small chairs over for Lawrence and Holo to sit in, so it seemed Rigolo was like this all the time—assuming that Melta, who gave a slight nod before leaving the room, was not a liar.

"You may have heard this from Eve Bolan, but we were hoping that you could show us any old tales of Lenos you might have records of."

"Oh ho, so it's true, then. Fleur—er, no, I suppose she goes by Eve among merchants. She's a bit too feisty, that one. Once she gets to know someone, she'll tell them all sorts of things."

Lawrence smiled in understanding. "Does that have anything to do with why you're not a stern-faced, long-bearded, old hermit?"

Rigolo laughed. "Seems she's been talking again! Though the hermit part's not necessarily untrue. Lately I've been doing all I can not to see anyone. Bit misanthropic of me."

Just when his tone of voice dropped a bit, Lawrence caught a glimpse of something chilly underneath Rigolo's smile.

He was the secretary of the Council of Fifty, a group made up of the most famous and recognized people in the city. A little chilliness was hardly worth being surprised at.

"I'm a foreign merchant—is it all right for you to be speaking with me?"

"Quite. Your timing is excellent, perhaps even the will of God. Take a look at my clothes; they're like the garments a child leading a funeral procession would wear, are they not? I've just come from the council meeting. They reached a decision and were able to adjourn early."

If that was true, then this timing really was the will of God, but Lawrence felt like it was a bit early for the council to have arrived at a conclusion.

After all, Arold had said it might drag on into the spring.

Perhaps someone had forced a vote.

"Goodness, you really are every bit the merchant that the feisty little minx said you were. Didn't let your guard down for a second, did you?"

Even if Rigolo had seen through his thoughts, it was a third-rate merchant that got flustered and tried to cover it up.

Besides, Lawrence was with Holo, who could quite possibly read minds.

Holo would certainly be able to tell whether Rigolo was trying to trick him into telling the truth.

"Hmm?" Lawrence asked, feigning ignorance, but Rigolo's smile remained steady.

"When we spend all our time using wiles and tricks, we stop understanding. Just like the back of the back is the front."

He had seen through the trick and Lawrence's feigning of ignorance.

Lawrence had been fairly confident that Rigolo wouldn't see through the ruse, but Rigolo's smiling eyes were still keen.

"I'm employed as the secretary for the Council of Fifty, you see. I can look at a group of people and perceive the changes in the expressions at a glance. Even if your expression alone doesn't tell me enough, if I consider the expressions of your companion, the truth naturally comes to me."

Lawrence smiled in spite of himself. There were people in the world like this—and not all of them were notorious merchants.

Rigolo laughed. "Ah, 'tis but a parlor trick. If I meant you ill, I wouldn't lay my cards out like this. And even if I could discern your true motives, I'm still unable to convey my own demands. I'd be a failure as a merchant, would I not?"

"...Unfortunately."

"I also don't have any success with the ladies."

Lawrence smiled. He had to admit that Rigolo's skill with words was rather unmerchantlike.

As he talked like a poet from some imperial palace, Rigolo produced a brass key from within a drawer in the room's desk.

"All the old books are in the cellar." He gestured lightly with the key, indicating that they should follow him, then proceeded into an inner room.

Before following, Lawrence looked over at Holo.

"The back of the back is the front apparently," said Lawrence.



"He was even watching my face..."

"First time I've seen anyone do anything like that."

He had probably developed the ability while having to hear and transcribe all the various conflicting conversations that happened over the course of a council meeting.

In order to grasp who said what, understanding their facial expressions would be of paramount importance.

"Still, he doesn't seem malicious. More like a child. But if you had someone like that at your side, you'd be able to pass your days without any worry at all," said Holo with a smirk.

Given how many times Lawrence had fallen prey to misunderstandings with Holo, that smirk was particularly painful to see.

"Meanwhile, you are full of malice," he said, not waiting for Holo's reply before he went off to follow Rigolo.

The first floor was constructed from wood, but the cellar below it was made entirely of stone.

Even in the village of Tereo, the cellar had been stone. Perhaps it was natural to want to keep treasures hidden in stone vaults.

But there was a huge difference between a cellar built to hide things and one built to store them.

The ceiling was high enough that Lawrence had to reach over his head to touch it, and the bookshelves that lined the walls reached from floor to ceiling.

Even more impressive, the shelves were organized by era and topic and had a numbering system.

The bindings were thin and flimsy—nothing compared to the thick, leather-bound volumes in Tereo—but the effort spent on organization was on another level entirely.

"Are fires common in this town?" Lawrence asked.

"From time to time. As you may have guessed, my ancestors had the same fear, which is why they built this place."

Although she had not been in the room that adjoined the garden, Melta seemed to have overheard the exchange there and now appeared in the cellar's entrance holding a candlestick.

Holo allowed the nun to guide her as she looked for promising books.

The pleasant light flickered in and out of visibility among the shadows of the bookshelves.

"By the way," began Rigolo once the two men were left to their own devices. "I'm the curious type, so I can't help asking. Why exactly are you searching for these ancient stories?"

Given that Rigolo hadn't asked about Holo's relationship with Lawrence, the heart of his interest was clear.

"She's searching for her origin."

"Her origin?" repeated Rigolo, the surprise obvious on his face. His powers of discernment might well have been the equal of any great merchant, but he had no control over his own expression.

"For a variety of reasons, I'm escorting her to her homeland."

If he omitted a few details, well, Rigolo could come to whatever conclusions he wished, which would allow Lawrence to avoid telling a lie while simultaneously keeping the truth at a distance.

Rigolo seemed to fall for it. "I see... So you're heading north, then?"

"Yes. We don't know the precise location, so we're trying to pinpoint it based on the stories she knows."

Rigolo nodded, a serious expression on his face.

He probably concluded that Holo had been captured in the north, then sold into slavery in the south. It was commonly said that children from the northlands were hardier and more obedient. There were also many stories of nobility whose children had died or were precariously sick and in danger of having their inheritance taken by other relatives who bought such children to adopt.

"It's not uncommon for children from the north to stay in this

town. It would be best if she could return to her home," said Rigolo.

Lawrence nodded his wordless agreement.

Holo emerged from the bookshelves, holding five volumes that evidently held some promise.

"You're certainly a glutton for knowledge," said Lawrence at a loss. It was Melta, not Holo, who answered him with a smile.

"These were all we found, so I should think it would be best if you took them with you for the time being."

"I see. Here, let me carry some of those. We'll be skipping meals for three days if we drop them."

Rigolo laughed as Lawrence wound up carrying the entire stack of books, and they returned to the first floor.

"Normally I'd ask that you read them here," Rigolo said, looking at the stack of books that Melta had bound into a convenient bundle. "But I trust Fleur, and Fleur trusts you, so I shall as well. I cannot say the same for others, though..."

Anytime foreign merchants were involved, there were many reasons to be distrustful.

"I certainly understand," said Lawrence.

"But if you drop, burn, lose, or sell them, it's three days without food!"

It was a joke, but Lawrence didn't laugh. Being able to calculate the monetary value of nearly anything, he was well aware that these books were priceless.

He nodded and picked up the bundle. "I'll protect them as I would protect my most precious cargo, on my honor as a merchant."

"Right then," said Rigolo with a boyish smile.

Lawrence wondered if Eve's heart would be moved by such things.

"Just bring them back when you've finished reading. If I'm not here, Melta will be."

"Understood. Again, thank you."

Rigolo answered Lawrence's nod with a smile, giving Holo a jaunty little wave.

Such gestures made him seem less like a merchant and more like a courtly poet.

Satisfied, Holo returned the wave as the two left.

"It's easy to wave when you're not carrying anything." Lawrence reasoned that a little grumbling was justified. Between carrying books and asking for directions, he had become quite the manservant recently.

"Aye, and you'd do well to make sure you're not waved off," shot back Holo, traipsing ahead of Lawrence.

Her teasing was frustrating, but at the same time, Lawrence was well aware that unless they were getting along well, such teasing would be impossible.

The problem was, Holo did little else.

"One can flatter a pig right up a tree, but flattering a male just makes him lose himself," said Holo, sealing off any protest from him.

There was no room for denial, that was the problem.

"Oh yes, I'm at such a loss I may well lose my temper," said Lawrence.

Delighted at the joke, Holo clapped her hands, laughing high and loud.

Once they had left the books at the inn, Lawrence made good on his promise to treat Holo to whatever she wanted for dinner, and having picked a tavern at random, Holo decided she wanted a whole roasted piglet.

Such a dish was a rare pleasure—an entire pig, spit down the center and roasted slowly over an open flame, occasionally drizzled with nut oil squeezed from a certain fruit.

Once the piglet was golden brown, its mouth was stuffed with herbs and it was served on a giant plate. It was customary for whoever cut off the piglet's right ear to wish for good luck.

Normally such a dish would feed five or six people; it was generally ordered for celebrations of one kind or another, and when Lawrence gave his request to the barmaid, her surprise was obvious. A murmur of envy was audible among the other men in the tavern when the dish was brought out.

And when that same dish was set down directly in front of Holo, the voices became a sigh of sympathy.

It was not uncommon for Lawrence to weather envious gazes because of his beautiful companion, but these men seemed mollified once they understood that his existence was an expensive one indeed.

Seeing that Holo would be unable to carve the roast herself, Lawrence took it upon himself to do so, but he lacked the willpower to put any of the meat on his own plate, instead settling for the crunchy skin. The fragrant nut oil was tasty enough, but Holo beat him to the crunchy left ear. Wine went better with meat than ale, and it commanded a fair price.

Holo literally devoured the meal, completely unconcerned when her chestnut hair slipped out from underneath her hood, becoming occasionally spattered with oil from the roast. She was the very image of a wolf taking its food.

In the end, she made short work of the piglet.

As she finished taking the meat from the last rib, a round of applause arose in the tavern.

But Holo took no notice of the noise.

She licked her fingers clean of oil, took a drink of wine, and burped grandly. Her actions were strangely dignified, and the drunken patrons of the tavern sighed with their awe.

Still ignoring them, Holo smiled sweetly at Lawrence, who sat on the other side of the now-ravaged piglet carcass.

Perhaps she was saying thanks for the meal, but having reduced the piglet to bones, she seemed even keener to hunt.

Or perhaps it would serve as emergency rations for the next time she was hungry, Lawrence told himself when he thought of the truly painful bill, giving up all hope of escaping from Holo's fangs. He would have no choice but to try not to forget about this emergency boon he had left buried in the den.

They rested for a while, and after Lawrence paid the bill—ten days' worth of bribery surely—they left the tavern.

Perhaps being the center of the fur trade gave Lenos an excess of tallow. The road back to the inn was dotted with a number of lamps, which softly lit the way.

In contrast to the bustle of daylight, people walked in small groups, speaking in low tones as if trying not to blow out the flickering lamps.

Holo had a dreamy smile on her face as she walked, perhaps thanks to the satisfaction that came with demolishing the roast.

Lawrence held her hand to keep her from straying off the path.

"..."

"Hmm?" Lawrence intoned. It had seemed like Holo was about to say something, but she merely shook her head.

"'Tis a good evening, is all," said Holo, looking vaguely down at the ground.

Lawrence, of course, agreed. "Still, we'd soon turn rotten if we spent every evening thus."

A week of such indulgence would empty his coin purse and turn his brains to mush, no doubt.

Holo seemed to agree.

She chuckled quietly.

"'Tis saltwater, after all."

"Hmm?"

"Sweet saltwater..."

Was she drunk, or was she trying to snare him yet again? Lawrence considered a reply, but the mood was too lovely to spoil with boorish chatter. He said nothing, and at length they arrived at the inn.

No matter how drunk they are, town dwellers can always find their way home as long as they can walk, but it is a bit different for travelers. No matter how tired their feet, they can persevere until they reach their inn.

Holo seemed to collapse as soon as Lawrence opened the door to the inn's entryway.

No, Lawrence thought, *she's probably just feigning sleep.*

"Goodness. At any other inn, you'd be scolded by the innkeeper," came Eve's hoarse voice. She and Arold were huddled around the charcoal hearth, Eve's head covered as usual.

"Only on the first night. After that, they'd give us a hearty laugh, no doubt."

"She drinks that much?"

"As you can see."

Eve chuckled voicelessly and sipped her wine.

Lawrence passed the two of them, staying next to Holo in order to support her, when Arold—who had been reclining in his chair, eyes closed and apparently sleeping—spoke up.

"About that fur merchant from the north. I talked with him. Said the snow's light this year, good conditions for travel."

"I appreciate your asking."

"If you want to know more... I forgot to ask his name again."

"It's Kolka Kuus," offered Eve.

Murmured Arold, "Ah yes, that was his name."

Lawrence would have liked to stay longer in this relaxed atmosphere.

"That Kuus fellow is staying on the fourth floor. He said he was mostly free in the evenings, so if you want to know more, go ahead and stop by his room."

Everything was going extremely well.

But Holo pulled on his sleeve as if to hurry him, so Lawrence paid his thanks to Arold and took his leave, and the two began to ascend the stairs. Just as they did, Lawrence caught a glimpse of Eve raising a wine cup to him, as if to say, "Hurry back down."

Step by step, they climbed the staircase, finally arriving at their room and opening the door.

How many times had Lawrence half carried Holo back to a room like this?

Before he met Holo, he had drunk and celebrated any number of times, but he always returned to his inn room alone, where the fear lurked that shocked the intoxication and joy from him.

Yet the fear was not gone.

It had merely been replaced with a new fear, as he wondered how many times he would be able to do this with her.

Though he knew it to be impossible, there was no escaping how much he wanted to tell Holo the truth—that he wanted to continue traveling with her forever. He now felt that whatever shape it took, being with her was his dearest wish.

Smiling ruefully to himself, Lawrence turned down the blanket and had Holo sit on the bed. He had gotten so that he could tell when she wasn't feigning sleep.

He unwrapped her cape and removed her robe, took her coat off, and helped her out of her shoes and sash—all with such skill it was almost sad. He then laid her down on the bed.

She slept so deeply he didn't think she would notice if he was to fall upon her.

"..."

The wine helped such notions bubble up in his mind, but he suddenly remembered Holo's shamelessness. She really wouldn't notice, right up until the end.

There is nothing so futile as all this, he thought, wilting faster than a popping bubble.

"You're awful," Lawrence murmured to himself, blaming her for his own selfishness, when she surprised him by moving, drawing herself up a bit.

Holo opened her eyes and gradually focused on him.

"What's wrong?" Lawrence asked, alarmed at the sudden thought that she might be feeling sick.

But that didn't seem to be the case.

From beneath the blanket, Holo reached her hand out.

He took it without thinking. Her grip was weak.

"..."

"Huh?"

"...Scared," said Holo, closing her eyes.

He wondered if she had been having a bad dream. When she opened her eyes again, her face was tinged with a lingering embarrassment, as though she'd said too much.

"What could you possibly have to be afraid of?" asked Lawrence in a cheery tone, and he thought he saw a grateful smile flicker on her face for a moment. "Everything's going well right now, is it not? We have the books. We haven't gotten swept up in any trouble. The path to the northlands is unseasonably clear. And"—he held her hand up for a moment, then lowered it— "we have yet to quarrel."

This seemed to work.

Holo smiled, then closed her eyes again and sighed softly.

"You dunce..."

She snatched her hand away and wrapped herself up in the blanket.

There was only one thing Holo was afraid of.

Loneliness.

So was it the end of the journey that she feared? Lawrence

himself feared it, and if that was the case, perhaps their travel proceeded too smoothly.

But even so, that didn't quite seem to fit the expression on her face right now.

Holo did not open her eyes for some time. Just when Lawrence began to wonder if she was asleep, her ears twitched as if she anticipated something, and she stuck her chin out a bit. "...What I'm afraid of, it is...," she began, then lowered her head when Lawrence reached out to caress it. "This is what I fear."

"Huh?"

"Do you not understand?" Holo opened her eyes and looked at Lawrence.

Her eyes shone, not with scorn or anger but with terror.

Whatever it was, she truly feared it.

But Lawrence could not for the life of him imagine what that was. "I don't. Unless...are you afraid of the end of our travels?" Lawrence managed to ask, though it took all his strength to do so.

Holo's expression softened somehow. "That is, of course...frightening, yes. This has been the most fun I have had in a great while. But there is something I fear still more..."

She suddenly seemed very distant.

"'Tis well if you don't understand. No"—she said, pulling her hand out from underneath the blanket and clasping the hand with which Lawrence still stroked her head—"even more than that, 'twould be troublesome if you did."

She then laughed at some jest, covering her face with both hands.

Strangely, Lawrence did not feel like this was a rejection.

It rather seemed to be the opposite.

Holo curled up into a ball beneath the blanket, seeming this time to truly intend on sleeping.

—But then she popped her head out again, as though suddenly

remembering something. "I do not mind if you go downstairs, so long as you do nothing to make me jealous."

She had either noticed Eve's gesture or was simply luring him into a trap.

In either case, she was correct about his plans. Lawrence patted her head lightly before answering. "Apparently I have a soft spot for jealous, self-loathing girls."

Holo smiled, flashing her fangs. "I shall sleep now," she said, then dove again beneath the blanket.

Lawrence still didn't know what she feared.

But he wanted to allay that fear if he could.

He gazed at the palm of his hand, the sensation of her head beneath it was still palpable. He closed it lightly, as if to prevent it from disappearing.

He wanted to stay longer, but he needed to go and thank Eve for introducing him to Rigolo.

She was a merchant who might well be gone from the town tomorrow, depending on circumstances, and he didn't want Eve to think of him as the kind of man who would tend to his companion before expressing proper gratitude.

After all, Lawrence himself had been a merchant for nearly half his life.

"I'll be downstairs, then," he murmured by way of some sort of excuse.

It occurred to Lawrence that what he'd told the barmaid earlier was true—that while he controlled the strings of his coin purse, his reins were tightly held. Frustratingly, he expected that fact was all too apparent from Holo's perspective.

"..."

Yes, all he feared was the end of the journey.

But what did Holo fear?

Lawrence was lost in thought like a little boy.

* * *

Lawrence saw three inn patrons drinking on the second floor. One of them seemed like a merchant; the other two were probably itinerant craftsmen. If they had all been merchants, it was unlikely they would have been able to drink together so quietly, so Lawrence was confident in his guess.

He reached the first floor. Arold and Eve were still there.

It was almost as if time had stopped. Nothing had changed since he went upstairs. The two of them did not speak and stared in different directions.

"Did a witch sneeze?" Lawrence asked. It was a common superstition that a witch's sneeze could stop time.

Arold only looked in Lawrence's direction with his deep-set eyes.

If Eve hadn't laughed, he would have worried he'd made some kind of faux pas.

"I'm a merchant, but not so the old man. Hard to make conversation," said Eve.

Perhaps because there was nothing that served as a proper chair, she gestured at an empty wooden box.

"I was able to meet with Rigolo thanks to you. He certainly was a melancholy sort," said Lawrence, taking the cup of wine Arold offered him. Someone could tell the stoic old man that his beloved daughter had come, and he probably wouldn't even go out to meet her.

Eve laughed. "He is, isn't he! There's no helping a man that gloomy."

"I do envy that technique of his, though."

"So you saw that?" Eve said with a smile. "He likes you. If you could get him to help you with business, you'd be able to strip most merchants naked, don't you think?"

"Unfortunately, he didn't seem inclined."

Rigolo was entirely indifferent to such things.

"That's because he's got everything he could ever want in that run-down, old place of his. You saw the garden, right?"

"It was incredible. You hardly ever see glass windows that large."

Eve's face was tilted down, but she looked up a bit and grinned at Lawrence's purposefully merchantlike answer. "I'd never be able to handle such a life. I'd go mad, I tell you."

Even if Lawrence didn't feel as strongly about this, he understood Eve's sentiment.

Merchants thought of profit roughly as often as they breathed.

"So did you hear about the meeting?" Eve's eyes peered out from beneath her cowl. Arold turned an openly baleful gaze upon her. She looked away.

Lawrence wore a smile, but beneath that, his merchant's face was ready.

"Apparently it's finished," he said.

Of course, Eve had no way of knowing whether or not that was true; she probably half doubted his answer.

That was assuming she didn't have any background information. If she did, this new revelation might well tell her all sorts of things.

"And its conclusion?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, we didn't get that far."

Eve looked closely at him from beneath her cowl, like a child staring at an hourglass waiting for it to run out, but presently she seemed to decide that no amount of gazing would reveal any more information.

She looked away, sipping her wine.

It was time to go on the offensive.

"Have you heard anything yourself, Eve?"

"Me? Ha! No, he's completely suspicious of me. Still, whether or not I believe you... hmm. Did those words really come out of his mouth?"

"It may well be the truth," said Lawrence.

If a conclusion had indeed been reached, then there might be others who knew what it was and whose lips would be looser. If the meeting's conclusion wasn't something that would profit foreign merchants, then no one would be harmed by its telling.

In the first place, official town meetings were held based on the assumption that their contents would be made public.

"What worries, me, though...," started Lawrence.

"Mm?" Eve folded her arms and looked in his direction.

"...is why exactly you are pursuing this avenue of conversation in the first place, Eve."

Lawrence thought Arold might have smiled.

In a conversation between merchants, the interests and motivations of the participants were obscure, indistinct.

"You certainly get right to the point. Either you've done more than piddling two-copper business somewhere along the line, or you didn't come to do a proper negotiation."

It was hard to imagine a woman having such steady resolve.

No, to be a woman and a merchant, she would have to have that resolve.

"I'm like the rest," said Eve. "I want to know how I can turn this into a huge gain. That's all. What else would there be?"

"You could be trying to avoid a huge loss."

Lawrence remembered the Ruvinheigen incident.

Even if one understood such loss intellectually, it was impossible to truly imagine until one experienced it for him or herself.

"People have two eyes, but it's no mean feat to watch two things at once. Though I suppose from a certain perspective, you're right about trying to avoid a loss."

"By which you mean...?" asked Lawrence. Eve scratched her head at this.

Arold watched them, smiling beneath his bushy beard. The two were like longtime boon companions.

"I trade in stone statues."

"Of the Holy Mother?"

The statue in Rigolo's house flashed through Lawrence's mind.

"Didn't you see the one in Rigolo's place? It's from a port town called Gerube on the western seacoast. I buy them there and sell them at the church here. That was my business. Since it just amounts to transporting and selling stone, there's not much profit in it, but if you can get one blessed by the Church, it'll sell for far more. The pagans are stronger in this region, so when the northern campaign comes through, it brings throngs of people who want to buy statues."

It was the strange alchemy of the Church. Just like in Kumersun, where speculation and enthusiasm drove the price of iron pyrite sky-high, religious faith could easily be turned into cash.

It was enough to make Lawrence want to have a go at it.

"Unfortunately, I don't see any of that profit, but in exchange, I moved a respectable amount. But that's all wiped out with the cancellation of the northern campaign. I've learned firsthand that no one hangs you out to dry faster than the Church."

It was hard to imagine a greater tragedy than carrying all your assets as heavy, unwieldy statues.

Transport costs would rise. Places to sell were limited. If she had gotten together credit to make her transaction bigger, her business might well suffocate.

Lawrence didn't think a merchant of Eve's stature would put all her risk in one place like that, so she probably wasn't facing utter ruin—but it was still a serious blow.

It would hardly be strange if, in her frustration, she turned her eye to speculation.

"The Church's influence is waning in the south, I hear. I'd been thinking it was time to stop loading my goods on a sinking ship—figured I'd make one last big deal, then make a break for it."

This suggested that she wouldn't be able to make a break for it unless she was able to make that one last deal.

"So," continued Eve, "we were just talking about how if I manage to hit it big, we might as well head south."

Lawrence didn't have to ask with whom.

Beside her, Arold murmured, "Been thinking it's about time for a pilgrimage."

A trip like that wouldn't be much different than looking for a place to bury his old bones.

Arold had been talking about going on a pilgrimage ever since Lawrence had started coming to his inn, but this time he sounded serious.

"So, that's how it is," said Eve, pulling Lawrence's gaze to her. "Want to lend me some coin?"

The sudden request did not seem connected to anything.

Yet Lawrence was not particularly surprised. He'd had a certain premonition that something like this was coming.

"I've got some very accurate information about the content of the council meeting," said Eve. "I can make all the arrangements. I just need money."

Her eyes were fixed steadily on Lawrence. She almost glared at him, but he could tell that it was something of an act.

"If I look at the details of the investment and decide the risk is worth the profit—with pleasure."

"It's the fur trade. You'll double your money." No merchant in the world would get on board with such a short explanation, but Eve seemed to understand that. She lowered her voice and contin-

ued calmly. "The Council of Fifty is going to provisionally allow fur sales to merchants."

"What's your source?" It was probably useless to ask—like trying to get a barmaid to tell her real age.

"The Church."

"Even though they turned their back on you?" Lawrence shot back.

Eve shrugged, smiling. "We might have split on bad terms, but everyone knows to leave a few sympathetic contacts behind."

Lawrence obviously couldn't trust her, but she didn't seem to be lying, either. It was a lot easier to believe this explanation than if she had just claimed to have heard it from Rigolo. "So what's the deal?"

"The provision will be that anyone buying furs will have to do so with cash."

There on the brink of the possible monopolization of the town's fur trade, Lawrence had wondered what decision would be handed down—but the cleverness of this particular plan made him speak without thinking.

"So they're not saying 'no sales,' but at the same time, merchants from distant places are hardly carrying significant coin."

"Exactly. But they can't very well return empty-handed, so they'll buy whatever fur they can afford with the miniscule cash they have on hand."

This meant that with cash, it would be possible to buy up the fine furs of Lenos and take them to some other town.

But something bothered Lawrence.

Now that Eve had told him this, there was nothing stopping him from cutting her out of the deal and doing it himself.

"You seem strangely comfortable talking about this with me."

"If all you care about is making a little extra allowance, then by all means, go do this deal yourself."

Eve's expression was unreadable beneath her cowl.

Was she merely looking down on him, or was there some reason why this deal couldn't work with just one person?

He couldn't say anything careless, Lawrence concluded, as he waited for her to continue.

"In reality, you don't actually have that much money, do you?"

"I won't disagree."

"Then you shouldn't waste this opportunity. You didn't even know Rigolo before I introduced you. Who in this town would be willing to lend you money?"

She was quite correct.

But something occurred to Lawrence, and it sent a chill down his spine.

It was possible that the reason Eve approached him in the first place was in order to evaluate him as an investor. If so, there was a huge discrepancy in the information they had.

Lawrence didn't know anything about her.

"True, but I could head back to a different city and raise the money there. But isn't that what you're counting on me doing anyway by proposing I invest in this opportunity?"

He didn't have a large amount of cash, and there was nowhere in this town where he could borrow the money, so that had to be it.

But Eve shook her head slowly. "Naturally, I took a look at you and your companion, the way you paid for the inn, and I figured if you went all in, you'd be good for maybe a thousand pieces of *trenni* silver. But by the time you get it together, the furs will be bought up is my guess."

The back of the back was the front.

The more careful Lawrence was to stay out of Eve's trap, the more tangled up he felt his feet becoming.

Wasn't the decision of the council intended to prevent all the fur from being bought up?

At a glance, the idea of limiting fur purchases to cash only had struck him as a clever plan.

"You don't actually think that all those merchants outside of town are just hanging out there separately for no reason, do you?"

"Somebody with real money is using them to make an even bigger profit," Lawrence suddenly realized.

"Yup. This, friend, is a trade war."

"A trade...war?"

It was an unfamiliar term and was the first time Lawrence had heard the phrase, but something about it made his merchant heart tremble.

"I guess you don't spend a lot of time near the sea. Go into any tavern in a port town and drink with the merchants there. You'll hear talk of the trade wars, believe me. It's not something that just happens out of nowhere. We're merchants, not bandits. The attacker has to make preparations well in advance."

That stood to reason. There wasn't a merchant in the world who didn't carefully inspect his merchandise.

"Odds are, the merchants camped outside the town are taking guesses at how the council decision is going to go and firming up their plans. How many people with money do you think there are in this town?"

Posed this question out of the blue, there was no way to be sure--except Lawrence was a merchant.

A rough estimate based on the size of the town appeared immediately in his head.

"The number of trading firms worth mentioning...maybe twenty, of various sizes. Shops specializing in a particular kind of good...perhaps two or three hundred. Maybe the same number of prosperous craftsmen."

"Roughly, yes. And among those, the question is how many will put their own gain in front of the town's."

Lawrence could not answer that question. Not because he lacked information about the town, but rather because people always hid their selfish desires even as they tried to fulfill them.

"Anyway, if even one of those trading firms chooses treachery, they'll sneak away with all the fur. If they operated through a branch office of another town, it would be easy to hide what they were doing."

Merchants were a generally sociable group and would not lightly betray a town in which they had operated profitably for years. But enough profit would cause anyone's loyalty to waver.

"Of course," continued Eve, "I doubt a large trading company would turn traitor. Nowadays everything's recorded in account ledgers, so it would be easy to see what they'd done. If they secretly lent money to an outside merchant, it could be traced."

Lawrence understood immediately. "Even if they had a hidden, unrecorded source of money, the council could stop that with a single line, 'The source of all money used to purchase furs must be confirmed.'"

He had thought that the foreign merchant registration plaques being handed out at the town gates were to prevent foreign merchants from laying unexpected traps, but now the practice felt much more significant than that.

Lawrence thought back to the strangely thorough inspection he and Holo had undergone. In retrospect, it had probably been to prevent travelers from bringing large amounts of money into the city.

Had the council arrived at its decision even then?

"But there are many, many other people with money outside of trading companies. The heads of the tanneries and the people who trade in the fur-tanning materials all have reason to be pessimistic about the future of the fur trade in this town. They're going to be looking for capital in order to get into new businesses, and they'll

be happy to deal with the merchants that are threatening the town in order to raise that capital. The council's policy probably is the best choice they have, but hardly anyone actually thinks that such a policy is going to stop the fur from being completely bought up. Let me say it again—"

Eve's voice was cold.

"—this town's fur will be completely bought out."

Was she suggesting that they close that gap and buy it themselves?

Defeating the merchants who planned to monopolize Lenos's fur trade meant being both inside and outside the town.

They must have understood that as long as they tried to infiltrate the town, not only would the council decision not come down, but the defensive measures the town took would only be redoubled—so they made camp outside of town.

In that case, even when the council's decision did come out, the merchants wouldn't immediately enter the town. They would only make their move after the public proclamation, ensuring it couldn't be reversed.

It was not impossible that Lawrence and Eve would be able to buy up the fur.

"You know then that there's no time to go to another city and borrow the money, so I can't help you. As you said, I have no connections here," said Lawrence.

This was the most puzzling part.

What was Eve planning?

Blue eyes peered out from beneath her cowl.

"Ah, but you do have one huge asset."

Lawrence quickly ran through the list of what he had on hand.

Nothing that could be called a "huge asset" came to mind.

In any case, if Eve knew about it, then it had to be something that was immediately obvious.

The only thing Lawrence could think of was his horse.

Then something else occurred to him. He looked back at Eve in disbelief.

"That's right. You have your lovely companion."

"... That's absurd."

Lawrence was now completely honest.

Though what he meant was not that he couldn't possibly sell Holo, but rather that selling Holo could not possibly raise the amount of money they required.

While it was true that Holo was a striking beauty, that was not something that could immediately be turned into a thousand silver pieces. If it could, beautiful girls everywhere would be constantly getting kidnapped.

It was possible Eve had figured out Holo wasn't human, but even if that was so, it didn't change the situation.

"I figured you'd think so. But there's a reason I chose you." Eve wore a thin smile for a reason Lawrence did not understand.

Perhaps she was merely that confident in herself, or perhaps she was drunk on her own plan. Or perhaps—

Eve removed her cowl, exposing her short, beautiful golden hair and blue eyes. "We'll claim she's a nobleman's daughter and sell her."

"Wha—?"

"Think it's impossible?" Eve grinned, baring her right canine tooth.

It was a smile of self-derision.

"My name is Fleur Bolan. Formally, I am Fleur von Eiterzentel Bolan, eleventh heir to the Bolan clan, which swears fealty to the kingdom of Winfiel. We are title-bearing nobility."

Laughter seemed impossible in the face of so ridiculous a joke.

The eyes and ears that were Lawrence's most important tools told him that Eve was not lying.

"Of course, we're fallen nobility that have trouble even finding food, but the name is grand, isn't it? Once we fell so low that we couldn't afford even bread to feed ourselves, I was sold to a newly wealthy merchant."

That was often the path down which fallen nobility were forced, and it explained her bitter smile.

Despite having fallen from grace, these proud nobles often had their titles and their bodies bought by wealthy merchants.

If this was true, it would explain Eve's strangely world-weary merchant's mien.

"That's the kind of woman I am, so that's why I know one or two places to sell a girl with a noble name. What say you?"

This was business territory Lawrence had never entered before.

Once he had amassed some wealth, the first thing a merchant would do was gild his own name. The massively wealthy owner of a successful trading company might once have been a garbage collector's orphan; such things were not rare. And apparently there were noble titles that one could buy with enough money. Lawrence had heard of such things but had never come face-to-face with the phenomenon.

But here in front of him was Eve, who had been bought in exactly that fashion.

"Your companion can easily pass as nobility. I would know," she said with a smile.

Her voice had turned low and hoarse after she'd suffered such a cursed fate, no doubt.

"Naturally, selling her is not the objective. As I said before, they're going to limit fur purchases to cash only in order to prevent a run on the fur market, but the trading firms here won't lend money to an outside merchant, right? But there's more than one kind of trading firm. If you can give them a good enough reason to, they'll float you a loan in exchange for a cut of the profits,

and I happen to know one. 'Selling a noble maiden' is just a pretense, and the trading firm understands that. They just need her as collateral in case our deal falls through. That's how I can guarantee it."

Lawrence found himself half-impressed at the convoluted explanation, but there was no way he was going to toss Holo into hock. It was far too dangerous. Even setting aside the issue of her own safety, if things went badly, there was no question that his life as a merchant would be over.

"I—no, we're not asking you to pawn off your precious companion."

"We?" repeated Lawrence, doubt in his voice. Eve shot a sidelong glance at Arold, who had been silent the whole time.

"I'm going on a pilgrimage," said Arold abruptly.

The old man had said it every time Lawrence stayed at the inn.

But Eve had said "we." That meant that Eve had joined up with Arold. It had to be that he really was going on a pilgrimage, and he was leaving Eve in charge of his assets and inn.

And pilgrimages could last for years, sometimes more than a decade. For Arold to go on such a journey at his age meant that he would never again set foot in Lenos.

Which meant—

"This may well be my last chance to go on the journey. I've thought to do it many times in the past and have been able to put away some capital for it. But I was never able to work up the resolve..."

Lawrence's stomach hurt from the suspense.

Arold gave a tired smile and looked at Eve.

He must have weathered some heavy persuasion from the woman.

Then from beneath his wrinkled eyelids, his blue eyes turned toward Lawrence.

"I'll hand over this inn."

Lawrence's breath caught in his throat.

"After all, don't all merchants dream of the same thing?" asked Eve, her voice only now as bright as the noble maid she had once been.

CHAPTER THREE



Once he'd slept and woken, Lawrence found himself somewhat calmer.

Though he had crawled into bed hoping for just that, Eve and Arold's words were liquor that did not encourage sleep.

"Let us know by tomorrow night whether you're in or out."

The words had echoed through his head over and over.

In exchange for Holo, who they would claim was the sole daughter of the Bolan clan, they would get two thousand, perhaps 2,500 pieces of *trenni* silver, with which they would buy furs to ship down the Roam River well ahead of anyone else.

Given that it was high-quality Lenos fur, even allowing for tariffs, Eve claimed they would triple their investment.

Despite feeling that this was overoptimistic, Lawrence couldn't help doing a rough estimate in his head.

Supposing that they were able to buy up two thousand silver pieces' worth of fur and triple their money, that left four thousand pieces in profit. Eve, along with Arold, was demanding 80 percent of that. Then there were some needed preparations, along with information fees, and the inn building that Arold was putting up as collateral—which would be given to Lawrence outright.

But the building alone was worth perhaps 1,500 silver, so immediately after he protested that 80 percent was too much, he fell silent.

In addition to the building itself, if everything went well Arold would also turn the inn management rights over to Lawrence.

There wasn't a merchant in the world who didn't understand the value of that.

With an inn, as long as a person had a building, he could open up shop and anticipate steady income—which meant that existing inns had a vested interest in resisting new ones opening and did so vehemently. There was no telling how much it would cost for an outsider to buy the management rights to such an inn.

And if Lawrence was to open an inn in Lenos, the hot springs town of Nyohhira was not far away, and it would be a good starting point to search for Yoitsu.

Given all this, it would have been strange if Lawrence was able to stay calm and think rationally about the situation.

But something about Eve's explanations was too good. At a glance, the plan seemed like it would work, but Lawrence couldn't help thinking that something was strange.

He also wondered if the huge amount of money was making him overthink the situation.

Or perhaps it was the fact that the plan relied on Lawrence raising the money, and to do that, he would have to sell Holo off—even if it was just temporary.

Holo had let herself be captured in Lawrence's place once, back in the port town of Pazzio.

But that time, she had been the one to propose it as the best course of action.

This time, Lawrence would be selling Holo for his own gain.

He suddenly understood why the Church reviled and persecuted his occupation.

There in the darkness, Lawrence wondered if he was really so willing to let Holo pretend she was nobility.

It was just as he was wondering when long night and its fitful slumber would ever end that Holo's voice pulled him fully awake.

"Come, you."

Lawrence opened his eyes at the sound of Holo's voice.

"...Ugh...is it morning?"

It seemed the endless night had been a dream. When Lawrence opened his eyes, he was greeted by light streaming through the window, along with the sounds of a town already bustling about its morning business.

Evidently sometime during his agitated mental calculations, he had managed to fall asleep.

He took a look at Holo, who stood beside the bed, and when he went to sit up, Lawrence realized he was covered in a terrible night sweat.

It made him think of the first time he had come into an opportunity to make a huge profit, shortly after setting out on his own. He'd woken up so drenched in sweat he was afraid he had wet the bed. And of course, the profit had turned out to be a scam.

"Whatever were you doing last night?" Holo demanded.

She seemed vaguely displeased, but there was no teasing in her voice. Perhaps she was genuinely concerned for him. Lawrence rubbed the slick sweat off the back of his neck. If Holo broke out with a sweat like this, he knew he would be worried about her.

"It was a very...intense conversation."

After he emerged from under the blanket, the cold morning air seemed to freeze the sweat once it made contact with his body.

Holo sat on her own bed and tossed him a cloth, which Lawrence accepted gratefully before stopping short of actually using it.

"I, uh...appreciate the gesture."

"I ought to get my scent on you, after all."

Holo seemed to have used the cloth while grooming her fur; it was covered in the stuff.

If he tried to dry himself off with it, Lawrence doubted it would go well.

"I am worried about you," said Holo.

"Sorry."

When Lawrence was the one worried, she would give him no end of teasing, but apparently she could not abide the situation being reversed.

"As you might have guessed, there's talk of a huge business opportunity."

"From that fox?"

Lawrence would have pegged Eve as a wolf, but Holo was a true wolf and seemed to see Eve as a fox.

"Yes. Or more properly, from Eve, that merchant woman, and Arold, the master of this inn."

"Hnn."

"Oh, indeed?" seemed to be Holo's reply, though it was far from indifferent.

Her tail was slightly fluffed up.

"Having only heard what they had to say, I haven't figured out the angle yet, and of course, I haven't given them an answer. But..."

Holo smoothed down the fur of her fluffed-up tail, replying with narrowed eyes, "But?"

"The profit is—"

"Greater than my preference?" Holo interrupted.

Lawrence closed his mouth, started to speak again, then stopped.

Holo was undoubtedly trying to say that before great profit came great danger.

A dog that burns itself on the hearth will never again approach it.

Only humans were foolish enough to burn themselves trying to snatch a chestnut from a fire again and again.

But roasted chestnuts were sweet indeed, so Lawrence reached into the blazing flames.

"It is great."

Holo slowly narrowed her red-tinged eyes. She stopped tending to her tail and scratched audibly at the base of her ears. But even then, Lawrence could not give up on Eve's proposal. He thought back to the first time he had argued with his old master.

"The profit is this inn itself—or that and more."

Holo could not fail to understand what that meant.

Lawrence anticipated that and spoke simply and plainly.

There was silence for a time.

All that kept it from being unbearable to Lawrence were Holo's red-tinged eyes, which were now nearly as round as the full moon.

"That would be... quite close to fulfilling your dream, would it not?"

"It would," replied Lawrence earnestly. Holo's knife-sharp mood vanished as though it had never been there, and she flicked her right ear back for a moment.

"What is there to debate, then?" she finally said. "I seem to recall that owning a shop is your dream, and if that's so, I've no call to stop you."

Holo took her tail in her hands and began to groom it.

She seemed somehow at a loss with him.

Unable to cope with her unexpected reaction, Lawrence stood rooted to the spot.

He'd prepared himself for her to categorically refuse—or if she had at least said the scheme was too dangerous, that would have been useful information toward determining the truth behind Eve's words.

Of course, the deal might be the chance of a lifetime, but if it seemed the danger outweighed the gain, he could let it go by.

He could always make money again.

But he would never meet another Holo.

"What ails you? You look like a neglected hound," she said.

Lawrence had been reflexively stroking his beard, and he felt like she had somehow hit the bull's-eye.

"Were you so happy being opposed by me?"

Holo's tail was chestnut brown, but the underside of it was snow white in the middle.

She combed it with her fingers, forming a white ball of fur.

"I assumed you would refuse, then I could go with the prevailing winds and nicely withdraw," said Lawrence honestly, and Holo grinned an exasperated grin at this.

"So you expected I'd shine some light on things with my usual wits and foresight."

"That was part of it."

"And the rest?"

There was no point in hiding what he felt. If he did, she would merely dig it up and toy with him.

"Well, here you are making that irritated face—" he began.

Holo chuckled dryly. "You dunce," she said briefly.

"—so I would ask you in return: Why the sudden change? You hated the idea of me getting involved in business here."

"Hmph," Holo sniffed, but was it because a bit of fluff had stuck to her nose or was she sniffing at his words?

Probably the latter, he decided, but she didn't seem too upset.

"You really are... ah, 'tis not worth saying. I know well what a fool you are. And 'tis a burden on me, ordering you about all the time."

You can't be serious, Lawrence thought—and perhaps sensing this, she gave him a threatening glare, as though she would truly tear him to pieces.

"Honestly...," Holo continued. "In the end, I spoke and acted only out of my own interest. For example, I do feel that simply being able to roam about with you is the best thing for me. All the times I acted as though I was teaching you some great truth of the world, it was just to keep traveling with you. In truth, it was painful."

She took the white ball of collected fluff and blew it aloft, then glumly turned her attention down to her tail.

No, more than glum—her expression said concretely, "This is absurd."

"You should weigh the danger you risk against the profit you stand to gain and act if you feel it is worth it. Wasn't it always your dream to own a shop? I don't want to get in the way of that."

"You're not in the way—"

"And anyway, if I hadn't come along, you'd be able to get involved in anything you wanted, and if your opponent tried to deceive you, you'd be at the ready, waiting to outsmart him and make a huge profit. You had the spirit and recklessness to do that, didn't you? Have you forgotten it?"

At Holo's prodding, Lawrence felt an old memory return to him.

Back in the port town of Pazzio, he had certainly possessed that much initiative. He had been desperate for profit, and would do things no one would believe to overcome what danger there was.

But it was hard to imagine that was only a few months ago. Not even half a year had passed, and yet it felt like those things had happened in the distant past.

Holo curled up into a ball on the blanket, facing Lawrence, her tail wrapped under her in such a way that it came up to the tip of her chin. "Nothing defends its nest like a human male does."

"Er—" was all that Lawrence could manage at her statement.

He only realized it now that he'd been told. The fortress that had

grown within him was a defensive one, created when he had felt he would be alone forever.

"But I cannot blame you for that. You... no, I always found your face rather charming when it was so scared of me."

This last jape of hers threw Holo's feelings into still sharper relief.

Of course, that might have been part of her plan.

"I was always quite selfish in my dealings with you. You could stand to be a bit selfish with me, too. And if you'd rather forget about me..."

Lawrence was about to quickly say that he wanted to do no such thing, but he noticed what Holo was trying to do and swallowed his words.

"You can safely turn your back to me. Right up until you get bitten."

Holo smiled, showing her fangs.

There probably wasn't a merchant alive who kept track of their debts and obligations as carefully as Holo did.

And Lawrence knew many merchants who had established households, and though they were tenacious men, they had fully lost their fight.

If he himself was happy being a thrifty, traveling merchant, then so be it.

But when he asked himself if he was indeed happy with that, Lawrence found he was not so worn-out that he could answer in the affirmative.

After he saw Holo to her homeland and returned to his travel and trading, it would not be so very long before he could raise the capital to open a shop.

But when compared with an inn and the management rights to go with it, that dream seemed desperately humble. With a building and those rights, plus assets to spend as he wished, just thinking about the possibilities was almost frightening.

Could he do it? Lawrence realized he wanted to try.

"Still, there were things about the deal they proposed that made me hesitate."

"Oh?" Holo looked up, interested.

Lawrence scratched his head and mustered his strength. "In order to raise the amount of money they need for the deal, they have to use you."

Holo's expression remained neutral, as if to say, "Go on."

"They're going to pass you off as a noble maiden and put you in pawn to a trading company."

Holo snorted as soon as she heard this. "Don't tell me that's what gave you such sweats last night."

"... You aren't angry?"

"I am only angry if you thought I would be."

He had heard that line before.

Yet Lawrence did not understand what she was getting at.

"You still do not understand?"

Lawrence felt like a young merchant's apprentice, who had been asked a simple question but was unable to answer it.

"You truly are just unbelievable...," said Holo. "Am I not your partner? Or am I just a maiden you fancy yourself protecting?"

When it was put to him that way, Lawrence finally understood.

"Do I not have some of my own virtues? If I can be of some use to your trade, then happily would I turn myself in!"

That was definitely a lie, but it was clear that as long as certain conditions were fulfilled, Holo trusted Lawrence enough to risk even a significant amount of danger.

If Lawrence had failed to recognize her trust in him... well, no wonder she was angry.

And those conditions were to trust her as a partner to grant his mildly unreasonable requests, to trust her as a wisewolf to keep him from falling into disaster, and finally, to respect her as a person of equal status.

As long as he didn't forget these things, Lawrence could ask her whatever he wished, and she wouldn't feel used.

"So I truly need your cooperation," he said.

"Hmph. I was a stand-in for you once before, but that was to thank you for being kind to me. This time, there's no thanking."

It wasn't as thanks nor was it a favor given or received.

Then what was it?

Not money nor obligation.

All of Lawrence's relationships so far had been zero-sum; the amount given equaled the amount taken. If something was lent, he expected it returned, and if he was the borrower, he had to pay the debt. Even "friendly" relationships were changed by credit into ones of transaction.

Holo was different, an entirely new kind of relationship.

But just as Lawrence realized what the most suitable term for it was, Holo gave him a look that said unmistakably, "Stop what you're saying."

"So, is there aught else you're worried about?" she asked.

"Of course. I'm worried it may be a trap."

Holo giggled. "If your opponent has a scheme, counter it. The bigger their scheme..."

She had said the same thing just after they'd met and a shady young merchant had tried to bring Lawrence in on a deal.

"The bigger the scheme, the bigger the profit when you upset it."

Holo stroked her tail and nodded. "I am Holo the Wisewolf. 'Twould be a fine thing, indeed, if my partner were some worthless merchant."

Lawrence laughed—they had had this conversation before.

Time did pass, and people changed.

He didn't know whether that was good or bad.

But he did know that having a partner to share this with made him happy.

"So, then," said Holo.

"Yes?"

And in any case, her name was deeply engraved on his soul, it seemed.

Her thoughts were entirely clear to him.

Lawrence smiled. "Breakfast, right?"

The first thing they needed to do was lay the groundwork.

If they could ascertain whether Eve was truly a statue merchant, whether her source of payment was really the Church, and whether she had really quarreled with them, this would tell them a lot.

Holo stayed in their room, saying she was going to read the books they had borrowed from Rigolo.

When she told him to go run about the city as he wished, Lawrence found himself wanting to say thanks. That seemed rather awkward, though, so instead he told her, "Enjoy your books, and don't cry too much."

Lying on her stomach, flipping through the pages, her only reply was to swish her tail dismissively. Her ears flicked minutely, probably because he had said something she didn't want to hear.

The mood downstairs was a bit strange given the previous night, but Lawrence gave Arold a quick greeting before heading out.

As long as he had the brisk morning air, the energetic town, and the warm sunlight, things could not be so very bad.

Lawrence started walking immediately.

He had no acquaintances in this city, and his only source of information was the barmaid of the Beast and Fish Tail. As this time of day was particularly busy for wine sellers and butchers who needed to buy up their supplies, though, Lawrence decided to head first to the church.

The town was of moderate size and the streets were complicated, so Lawrence had not yet seen the church, but he did have the impression that its standing within the town was reasonably strong.

By the time one got into the vicinity of Lenos, pagans were hardly rare, and it was common enough to have one as a neighbor.

One would think this would imply a lessening of power on the part of the Church, but on the contrary, it only drove the true believers' morale higher.

They believed that hardships were trials sent by God, so it made a certain amount of sense. Arold's strong desire to go on a pilgrimage to the south was probably rather common here.

The most fervent believers could always be found where the Church's power was weakest.

Perhaps this was because without being prepared to endure, the flame of their faith would surely be extinguished by the storms of paganism—or perhaps those storms were like a wind to a bonfire.

On that count, there was no reason to doubt Eve's importation of stone statues. There was surely a demand for them.

But that didn't mean there was no call for doubt at all.

Lawrence bought some rye bread from a baker and asked directions, and when he saw the church, he immediately gave voice to his impressions.

"It's like a vault."

It was less a church and more a stone-carved temple.

The design was familiar, but the atmosphere itself was different. He passed through the doors and into the church where a handful of people were performing their morning worship.

One could tell if a church had money by looking at its entrance. Nobody appreciated a church interior that lacked a sense of age, of ancientness, but the entrance was different. As the entrance was worn down and warped by people walking through it, a church

with money could pay for appropriate maintenance. It was purely a display of wealth.

And this particular church's entrance, despite all the people that passed through it, was a series of beautifully carved stone steps.

It was clear that the church of Lenos had money.

So—what about their expenditures?

Lawrence cast his eye about, looking for a likely spot.

Between the church and a group of three smaller buildings was an alley that ran into the interior of the block. Just a short distance down it was a space where the hustle and bustle of the town and the light of day did not reach—along with those who lived in that space.

As Lawrence walked down the path, none of the people so much as looked up at him.

It would take a keen incantation indeed to rouse them from their sleep.

"The blessings of God be upon you," said Lawrence to one of them.

It had been hard to tell whether the man was dead or just sleeping, but his eyes now snapped open. "Hnn! ...Oh. Not giving alms, are you?" he said, his voice a mixture of anticipation and disappointment.

Lawrence looked the man over from head to toe—he certainly didn't seem to be a man of the Church.

Offering some of the still-warm rye bread to the man, Lawrence gave his best merchant's smile. "No alms, I'm afraid. I'd like to ask you some questions."

The man's face flushed at the sight of the bread. He didn't seem to be one to quibble. "Hell, ask anything you like."

He devoured the rye bread with a speed that surprised even Lawrence, who had grown used to Holo's gluttonous eating, then grinned a toothy grin.

"It's about the church," Lawrence said.

"What do you want to know? How many mistresses the priest has? Who the father of the child that nun gave birth to a while back was?"

"Those are fascinating, but no. I was wondering how much bread this church bakes."

Obviously the church was not a bakery. He was asking instead how much bread the church distributed to the needy. There were churches and abbeys whose finances declined to the point where they did not do such work, but most of them did in proportion to the state of their coffers.

And as a result, the recipients of that charity naturally knew the state of the church's kitchen.

"Heh, it's been some time since I've been asked that."

"Oh?"

"Used to be, merchants like you would come to ask all the time. You want to know how the church here fares, yes? Seems it's not bringing people in the way it used to. Guess God needs more propaganda."

There was a saying in business: "Look at the feet." It meant looking at your opponent to understand not just his weaknesses, but his entire situation.

And on that count, who better to look at the feet than the beggars who spent their days lying in the street, looking at the feet of all who passed by?

Occasionally, such beggars would be expelled en masse from a town because those in power were afraid of how much knowledge the beggars had of their coffers.

"I've been to many towns in this area, but the church here is the best. They may not give out huge amounts of bread or beans, but the quality is always good. Although..."

"Although?" repeated Lawrence back to the man.

The man closed his mouth and scratched his cheek.

There was a hierarchy among beggars. Those closer to the church entrance, where it was easier to solicit, had more complete information.

Lawrence took two cheap copper coins out and handed them over to the beggar.

The beggar chuckled. "Although—the bishop scatters more money about the town than he does bread among the beggars."

"How can you tell?"

"Oh, I can tell. When a splendid carriage that has its own escort to drive away beggars like me drives up, I can tell. And it's plain as day what kind of dinner was served from the garbage they throw away. And looking at how many cocky men about town come to that dinner, I can tell how important the guest was. Impressive, is it not?"

People in power did not hold grand dinners without motivation to do so. Since they evidently had a business based on buying statues from Eve, then consecrating and selling them for far more money, such dinners had to be political in nature—nothing less than an investment.

So while it still wasn't clear what the Church was trying to achieve, given this information, Lawrence now saw that it wielded power within the Council of Fifty.

And yet, thought Lawrence to himself as he regarded the beggar.

When a town was invaded in times of war, he could see why it was always the beggars who were first put to the spear.

Each and every one of them was like a spy.

"Could you not use your insight to raise your position in society?" asked Lawrence in spite of himself.

The man shook his head. "You don't get it, do you, pal? God said, 'Blessed are the poor,' didn't he? Do you get a warm, happy

feeling in your gut from just a piece of crusty black bread and two copper coins?" The man stared hard at Lawrence. "I know I do."

Not all wise men wrapped themselves in leather coats.

Lawrence had the feeling that this man was a better embodiment of God's teachings than anybody within the church next to which he begged.

"Anyway, so I don't know what it is you're planning," continued the beggar, "but if you try to deal with this church, they'll just hang you out to dry. I only know one merchant who worked with them for a long time, and even he wound up screaming at them in that hoarse voice of his."

Lawrence knew immediately who the beggar was talking about.

"The statue dealer?" he asked.

"Statues? Ah yeah, I guess he did haul some of those. He a friend of yours?"

"Sort of. So...did he deal in anything else?" There hadn't been any talk of side businesses, but merchants frequently packed smaller items in between their main cargo.

That was Lawrence's thinking, but the beggar's answer made his eyes widen in surprise.

"I thought for certain he was a salt merchant. Wasn't he?"

If Lawrence had been asked to name three particularly heavy goods to haul, he would have been able to do it instantly—stones for masonry, alum for dying clothes, and salt as a food preservative.

All of them were ill suited to running as a small sideline.

Excited, Lawrence pressed the man. "Why would you think that?"

"Whoa, easy there, friend. Is he some kind of rival? I don't want to get in trouble just because you asked me some questions," said the man, pulling away and looking at Lawrence dubiously.

"Sorry," said Lawrence, returning to himself. "He's not a rival. He's someone I'm going into business with myself."

"...Ah, so you're looking for scraps from his background, eh? Well, you look like a good sort. I suppose you wouldn't tell an out-and-out lie. Sure, I'll tell you."

Lawrence, like any merchant, wasn't sure whether he was happy about being told he looked like a good person.

On one hand, it was good that people would let their guard down around him, but it might also keep them from taking him seriously.

The beggar cackled. "Oh, I only meant that there are plenty of merchants who try to use us, but most of them think they're better than us. And even fewer spare me any admiration for my words. That's all I meant."

Lawrence was so flustered by this that he almost told the beggar that flattery wouldn't gain him any more coin.

"Ah, but anyway, it's a simple thing," said the beggar. "Sometimes when that merchant would visit the church, salt would fall from between the cracks of his cargo. I would have been able to tell from the smell if it had been salt used for packing fish or meat—it would've made a fine addition to some liquor. But as salt goes, it tasted poorly. That's why I made him as a salt merchant."

The farther inland one moved, the more precious salt became.

Eve had said she brought statues in from a town that faced the western sea.

It would be an easy matter to pack sea salt in the same boxes that carried the statues.

Or she might have been smuggling it in.

If she had been trading with the church for a long time, they might have eased up their inspections of her cargo as a perk.

"So that's how it is. Anything else you want to know?"

It wasn't just that the beggar had given him useful information; his prone, dirty form had a strange dignity to it.

But Lawrence had heard everything he needed to hear. "You've

given me the secret to living a happy life. That's more than enough."

It seemed there really were gold nuggets to be found by the roadside.

It appeared that Eve had indeed conducted deals with the Church.

And Lawrence now knew that the bishop was throwing money around the town in order to accomplish some kind of political goal.

If that was the case, it was hardly strange that she would be prepared to risk some blame and make some money. After the statues were cheaply bought and blessed, it was the selling of them so dear that had charm, no doubt.

But if that was so, something was strange.

The statue transactions were a stable source of income—would they be ruined with but a single stumble? Did the Church simply not take Eve seriously, or had they created a distribution system that let them procure the statues themselves?

Eve had simply decided to leave the town for good, but she seemed to not have fully abandoned the possibility that the deal could be restarted the following year, which struck Lawrence as awfully gracious indeed.

According to the beggar, Eve had quarreled with the church so fiercely that her shouting voice could be heard outside the building. Yet none of this was of enough importance to justify parting with such anger. Sometimes doing business meant winding up with worthless stock or having business partners turn their backs on you. It was hardly rare.

Naturally such things were upsetting, and the deeper your trust, the stronger the feeling of betrayal. But Eve had not struck Lawrence as so young a merchant that she would think shouting would change the situation.

Did the Church know that Eve was nobility, albeit fallen nobility?

She had said that there was a trading firm in the town that knew about her noble background.

The Church had information-gathering prowess that would put any trading firm to shame—it had to know.

It was incomprehensible that the same bishop who invited moneyed nobility from all over to lavish dinners would discard Eve, who was herself nobility. She could be useful for any number of things.

Or had her usefulness disappeared?

Was that why she offered to bring Lawrence, a merchant she had just happened to meet, in on a deal worth thousands of silver pieces?

Was it out of desperation? Or was she trying to recover? It couldn't have been just a passing tip. The amount was far too high.

Was he overthinking things to wonder if she had a motive beyond simple profit?

But even if she was trying to lure Lawrence into a trap, there were only a few choices.

She could run off with the goods once Lawrence had fronted the money or kill Lawrence midway through the export or possibly make a secret deal with the trade firm to sell Holo off, then pretend nothing had happened.

Yet none of these seemed likely.

The deal Eve had proposed was entirely legal (save for her passing off Holo as a relative of her noble house), so the contents of it would be declared before a public witness and Lawrence would have a copy. If he was to send this to a trading firm in some other town, his opponent would be unable to make any careless moves. As long as a third party had a careful record of all of Lawrence's actions, none of these plans would be easy for her to put into action.

Moreover, Lawrence didn't expect that Eve took him so lightly as to think such simple schemes would work against him.

Perhaps she really wasn't planning anything.

All deals lay somewhere in the gap between trust and suspicion.

He was far from trusting her, but he would only be able to investigate for so long before the deal became impossible.

He would have to decide.

Lawrence mulled it over as he made for the Beast and Fish Tail.

If the Council of Fifty had reached a decision, which seemed to be an open secret now, he expected there would be new information circulating.

When he reached the tavern, it was completely empty; not a single person was to be found inside. Walking down the alley that ran to the rear of the building, he found the barmaid washing a large basin that looked as though it was used to hold wine.

"Goodness, you're here early," she said.

"I must assume it's the cold wash water making you pull such a face."

"Oh, aye, and it's on that account I may be a bit cold myself," she said with a smile, putting down the balled-up length of hempen cloth she was using to wash the basin. "How many merchants do you suppose have come to speak with me?"

All of them desperate for profit, no doubt.

Lawrence didn't know how many merchants within the town were trying to stake a claim in the fur trade, but Eve seemed to believe that she and Lawrence could make a profit. He wondered if that was really true. It was another thing that worried him.

"Can you not imagine that your beauty was their aim?" asked Lawrence.

The barmaid giggled. "Smiles are gold, words silver. How many boorish louts do you suppose offered copper coins?"

It couldn't have been too many yet more than a few, no doubt.

"I'll admit I've come to ask some rather boorish things myself."

"I've no doubt of that. Owe a merchant a favor, and he'll always come to collect. So, what is it you want to know?" Apparently she had put down the cloth not to talk to Lawrence, but rather to empty the basin of its water. She tilted the basin, which was big enough for Holo to curl up inside when lain flat, and poured its contents onto the ground.

"It's about the Council of Fifty," said Lawrence plainly. If he'd delivered a pick-up line so flatly, he could have gotten his tail kicked and had no call to complain.

But the barmaid only shrugged and smiled. "I hear they've come to a conclusion. They say they're going to allow fur sales but not on credit."

It was exactly what Eve had said.

Just as Lawrence considered how to value this information, the girl swept the grape-tailings into a corner with her foot and continued. "Customers were asking me about it all last night. Honestly, one or two of them could've at least brought me a love letter."

Lawrence considered this new datum while skillfully replying, "A contract is a merchant's only love letter."

"Ah, 'tis true that loving and being loved is not enough to fill one's belly," said the barmaid. "Hmm," she added uncertainly, then smiled grandly, as if to add, "Though for a woman, that's not really true."

Lawrence smiled ruefully, but he knew that if he was to go along with her game, he would be no better than her drunken patrons. "Though for my part all I need is but a glance, and I'm satisfied. I feel as though I should thank you for the meal!"

The barmaid was stunned for a moment, then smacked Lawrence playfully with her hand, which was red from her kitchen chores. "Sir, you are unfair! That was what I was going to say!"

Lawrence laughed, but his mind was keen and focused.

It struck him as strange that since last night so many merchants had come here to confirm their information with this girl. Assuming the information had leaked to them via a colleague, there shouldn't be any need to go talk to some tavern's barmaid to confirm the story.

And from whose mouth was she hearing the latest news anyway?

Perhaps most of her knowledge could be inferred from the information that merchants inadvertently let slip as they asked her questions.

"Were most of the people that came to ask you questions frequent customers?"

"Huh? Frequent?" The girl wrung water out of the washcloth. Lawrence wondered if her hands hurt, given the cold water and chilly weather. She frowned and exhaled, her breath visible. "I guess I'd say it's been about half regulars and half not. Only..."

"...Only?"

The girl looked around furtively, then lowered her voice and continued. "Only a lot of the new customers have been rather careless. You're the only one among them who's asked proper questions."

"Oh, come now," replied Lawrence with his merchant's smile.

"I won't tell them a thing when they're like that. Foreign merchants may have sharp ears, but they've also loose tongues. They'll come in and just blurt out, 'So I hear fur buying is going to be cash only, is that true?' It's absurd!"

"They're failures as merchants," Lawrence said with a chuckle, but internally he was far from calm.

If all merchants were so foolish, business would be easier than it was.

And it certainly wasn't the case that only foreign merchants made such mistakes. Of course, the citizens of a town tended to

believe that the people who called it home were the smartest and best, but that was nothing more than a widely held illusion.

So what was their goal?

Perhaps the foreign merchants were talking so freely of the council's decision as a signal to show that they had that information in an effort to disturb and intimidate the local merchants. Or perhaps it was a tactic on the part of moneylenders and changers to temporarily drive the value of currency up in anticipation of cash-only fur transactions.

But the foreign merchants had nothing to gain from spreading fake information, so whatever their goal, the meeting result that Eve had spoken of was probably true.

If the group of merchants outside the town were all acting out of their own personal self-interests, then they might be trying to create confusion in order to lure other parties away from the truth. In that case, though, Lawrence would expect there to be more than one story about the council's decision circulating.

Likewise, the town insiders and those close to them would know the truth firsthand, so it seemed unlikely that the foreign merchants were trying to create a disturbance within the town.

Eve had said she'd heard the news from sources within the Church.

Whether or not that was true, Lawrence might learn something here that would help him divine something from it.

"By the way," he started.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to ask about the church here—," said Lawrence.

"Uh, please lower your voice," interrupted the girl, her face suddenly stiff, grabbing his arm and pushing him through the barely opened back door of the tavern.

She then peered through the cracked door to make sure no one had seen them.

Just as Lawrence was wondering what was going on, she turned to face him. "If you're asking about the church, you must have heard at least a bit already."

"Well, I suppose..."

"Take my advice, you shouldn't get involved."

The barmaid's expression was so serious there in the cramped back hall of the empty bar that he felt the mask of his coolheaded merchant's face slipping, but Lawrence quickly recovered and responded.

"So there is a power struggle, isn't there?"

If the girl hadn't had acting ability to rival Holo's, Lawrence would have known for sure he'd been dead-on.

"We serve uncommon dishes here, so we're one of the places that caters the church's dinners."

This corroborated the beggar's tale, and this was one of the few shops from which the church could order any meat dish they wished.

The girl scratched her head, sighing uncomfortably. "I don't know all the details, but it seems they're inviting powerful figures from all over. Once we were up for two nights straight cooking for some Church bigwig who'd come from far away."

A distant Church dignitary.

If this was a power struggle, Lawrence knew all too well what it pointed to.

The conversation was taking a strange turn.

"So they're solidifying their power base," said Lawrence.

"Yes. And they've been very careful about their reputation, like it's clay that hasn't dried yet. They give generously to the poor, but whence comes their money, no one knows. So there's no telling what might happen to whoever says anything. Everyone whispers to each other about how if the Church's eye falls upon them, they won't be able to stay in the city."

"If this is all true, why are you telling me?" asked Lawrence, slightly intimidated by the girl's seriousness.

"Well, I wouldn't tell just anyone."

Just as Lawrence wore the mask of a merchant, this girl surely wore the mask of the barmaid.

So if the back of the back was the front—which was this?

"For future reference, might I ask why you're making an exception?"

"Well, if I had to venture to say...," she replied strangely coy, her face drawing near. "I suppose it would be because you have the scent of another woman about you."

Unable to retreat because of the wall behind him, Lawrence stared at the girl, his face faltering. "So it's your pride as a barmaid, then?"

The girl giggled. "There is that, but there's something about you that just makes a girl with a bit of confidence want to have a go. Do you get that a lot?"

Unfortunately, Lawrence's experience was limited to being rejected by inn maids.

All he could do was shake his head.

"Well, then there's only one explanation. You've only recently met the girl at your side."

She was not to be underestimated. Was this what they called female intuition?

"It's because you seem a very gentle person," the girl continued. "I'll bet no one gave you a second look when you were wandering about on your own, but once we see that you're with another girl, we women get curious. If a beast sees a single sheep on its own, it might be too lazy to hunt it, but if a wolf is with that sheep, then we begin to wonder—is that sheep really so tasty? And we covet it for ourselves."

There weren't many men who would appreciate being com-

pared to a sheep, but it was sadly true that he did in fact have a wolf by his side.

Was this girl really human?

"That's why I'd very much like you to bring your companion by the tavern."

Without interest in money or status, perhaps it was this sort of spice that was perfectly suited to adding a bit of flavor to life.

Surprisingly, that was probably what she had taken in exchange for telling him the truth.

"You've already given me that invitation," he said.

The barmaid gave a smile of frustration. "Oooh, that composure is so frustrating."

"I'm a sheep, after all. We're unsympathetic creatures," said Lawrence, putting his hand to the back door. He then turned back to the girl. "Of course, I'll tell no one of this conversation."

"Not even your charming companion?"

Lawrence couldn't help but laugh.

He wondered if this kind of girl was more his type than some mild maiden.

"So, you've told me everything, you say?"

"Without leaving out a bit."

Lawrence had returned to find Holo just as he'd left her—reading books, her tail swaying lazily. It flicked to a sudden stop.

"It seems I need to teach that girl a few things about territory." Holo looked at Lawrence, her expression mildly pleased. "But it seems you're coming to understand the truth of certain things."

"For a draft horse to be free despite its reins, it must anticipate the will of its driver."

Holo smiled, satisfied. "So," she said, sitting up. "What think you of all this?"



It seemed safe to believe that Eve had indeed sold statues to the Church, that they had a disagreement, and parted ways.

Also, Eve's description of the outcome of the council meeting seemed to be accurate.

What worried Lawrence was that in trying to gain control of the town, the Church was trying to establish a cathedral. Cathedrals acted as centers of power for the Church organization and were established based on the recommendations of influential landholders or clergymen, but generally the extant clergymen in such areas resisted the establishment of cathedrals because they represented a new power structure in the region.

Of course, Lawrence had heard that this was all dependent on money and connections.

If a cathedral was established here, the local church's current bishop would go from a man who was appointed bishop to one who appoints them himself. He would have the right to collect a certain amount from the tithes given to churches all over the region and the right to sanction secular rulers in the region.

Sole religious jurisdiction would be his, and while it was an extreme example, he could accuse all who disagreed with him of heresy, having his rivals burned at the stake. That said, most bishops' interests lay in being able to levy fines, and no authority would exceed Church jurisdiction.

It was anticipating such a situation that had made the barmaid so fearful of speaking out against the Church.

Lawrence could certainly understand why, having parted with the Church on bad terms, Eve would want to leave town and why she wouldn't be able to casually talk about restarting their arrangement next year.

What he couldn't understand was why she would fight with the Church in the first place. For Lawrence's part, he would have eaten mud to avoid crossing them. It would've been worth it.

It might not be a bad idea to make a gamble if it meant being able to understand the situation.

Given the Church's power in the Council of Fifty, no doubt the council's decision was made by the bishop, and since that decision would have been made in the best interests of the town's economy, Eve's plan stood in opposition to the Church.

Lawrence came to wonder if it was possible that his life might actually be at risk.

If a foreign merchant was killed or went missing after making a legitimate transaction, suspicion would immediately fall on the party that stood to profit from that merchant's death—the town's authority figures. Lawrence was a member of the Rowen Trade Guild, so if he made that clear, it was unlikely that a bishop angling to establish a cathedral would take such drastic, violent action.

And the scale of the deal that Eve was organizing, while a vast sum to a lone merchant, was not particularly significant in the context of the entire town's fur trade. Lawrence doubted he would attract the wrong kind of attention over such a relatively small venture, and it surely wouldn't become a matter of life or death. Of course, to some individuals, thousands of silver pieces could certainly be worth killing over.

Lawrence explained this all to Holo.

The wisewolf listened seriously for a while, but her posture grew lazier and lazier, and eventually she collapsed back onto the bed.

Lawrence, however, was not angry.

He could find no reason to object to her behavior.

"What do you think?" he finally asked. Holo yawned at this, wiping at the corners of her eyes with her tail.

"I find no fault with your explanation itself. It all more or less makes sense."

Lawrence was about to ask whether that meant he should go ahead with the deal or not but stopped himself short.

He was the merchant; he would be the one to decide.

Holo chuckled. "I'm a wisewolf, not a god. If you start to think me an oracle, I'll vanish."

"Before a big deal, I always start to feel like I want to ask someone's opinion."

"Hah, even though you've already come to a decision? Would you change your mind if I tearfully begged you to?" Holo grinned.

Lawrence knew how he needed to answer. "Even if I did brush it off, you'll still be there at the inn. I'll complete the deal, then return. That is all there is to it."

Holo chuckled throatily, scratching at her neck as though Lawrence's words were difficult to listen to. "Aye, and once you can say those words without blushing, then you'll be a proper man."

Lawrence had grown used to Holo's japes.

He shrugged them off. They were no more than a greeting by now.

"I must say, though, that you were certainly energetic during your explanation there. Of course"—continued Holo, cutting Lawrence off—"I'm not saying that is a bad thing. Males are at their best when chasing their prey."

Now it was Lawrence's turn to scratch his nose in awkward embarrassment, but if he didn't find some retort for Holo, she would surely become angry.

He gave a deliberate sigh, then reminded himself that he was going along with her joke. "But you just want me to pay attention to you once in a while, too, yes?"

"Got it in one," said Holo, smiling happily. "However, what will become of me should the deal fall through?"

"Well, you're collateral. So if we can't return the money, you'll be sold off somewhere."

"Oh ho." Holo lay facedown on the bed, her head resting on her folded arms, her tail and legs pointed up and waving lazily in the air. "So that was what gave you such nightmares?"

"... That, too."

If their deal failed and they were unable to pay back what they owed, Holo would become the property of the trade firm.

However, she would hardly sit there meekly and allow herself to be sold.

That gave Lawrence some measure of relief, but he was not so optimistic as to think that once she bit through the ropes that bound her and escaped, she would come running back to him.

"Should it come to that, I'll have to pick someone a bit cleverer as my next partner," said Holo, her red-amber eyes narrowed maliciously.

"Indeed. It'd be best to cover such a fool in the dirt kicked up as you left him," Lawrence quickly replied to Holo's teasing.

The wisewolf did not seem pleased. "Big words from the brat who practically cried when I nearly left before."

Lawrence made a face as though he had swallowed a walnut, shell and all.

Holo grinned, satisfied, the *pat-patting* of her tail audible.

It was after she ceased wagging it that her expression shifted and she spoke again. "But I shall cooperate because I trust you."

Her smile was genuine.

Lawrence scratched his chin, then stroked his beard. "Naturally."

It was twilight.

The sunset was red, and here and there shone the first lamplights of the evening, as though they were lingering fragments of the vanishing sunshine. As the chill of night settled in, people hurried home, their faces buried in their warm mufflers.

Lawrence gazed out on the town for a moment; then once the sun was fully set and the town streets emptied, he closed the wooden window of their inn room. Holo continued to read her books by the light of a tallow lamp.

The books seemed to have been organized chronologically, and Holo read the most recent chronicles first.

Considering what they had learned in the village of Pasloe, Lawrence felt that she would find what she was looking for faster if she started from the oldest records, but he suspected that she avoided doing so in order to preserve some measure of composure in her heart.

In any case, only two volumes remained, so the probability that she would soon find the accounts she sought was very high. Holo seemed to be very concerned about what would happen after that, and even after darkness fell, she said she wanted to read. Thus Lawrence gave her permission to read by lamplight, provided she was careful to keep soot—and especially flame—away from the pages.

Holo did not wear her normal indoor robes when reading. She was fully dressed to leave at a moment's notice.

This was not because of the cold, but rather because they would soon be going to negotiate with Eve.

"Well then, shall we go?" Lawrence asked.

The time of the negotiation had not been set precisely, but Lawrence could be reasonably certain, since "at night" was a generally agreed-upon range among merchants. Once he headed downstairs with Holo and waited, it was hard not to feel like a small-time merchant who was overexcited by the notion of profit.

But Eve was late—very late—which was rude.

Perhaps this was her idea of a test.

She hadn't said to meet at sunset because merchants preferred

to write their figures during the day, when no candles were necessary, and because it would take them a bit of time to return to the inn.

So presumably she had wanted to wait until after that wave of merchants had returned to the inn and settled down.

If he listened carefully, Lawrence could tell which occupants had returned to which rooms.

Weighing that against the number of rooms in the inn, he expected Eve to arrive soon.

"You merchants are a troublesome lot indeed," said Holo, closing the book with a thud and sitting up on the bed, stretching.

Even a normal girl would have been able to tell that Lawrence was fidgeting over when would be the best time.

"If I must put on an act even in my own inn room, when am I to relax?" asked Lawrence, half joking.

Holo got off the bed, seeming to think something over as she adjusted her ears and tail beneath her cloak. "For some time after we met... no, even recently, you've seemed to always put on a bit of an act around me."

"It's the first time I've ever traveled with a girl. Took time to get used to."

It was also the first time he had let himself go this much around anyone else.

He'd never felt so comfortable around anyone before.

"And yet when we'd just met, your nostrils would puff just from walking about with me," said Holo

"Aye, and would your tail puff up if you saw me with another woman?" Lawrence shot back.

Holo looked up and regarded him as if to say, "You've got a lot of nerve." She then said, "But just like that, a male will gradually reveal his true colors, and eventually turn into someone you never would have expected."

"Isn't that true for more or less anyone as you become close to them?"

"Fool. Don't you humans have a saying, 'Feed not the fish you catch?'"

"That doesn't apply here. I didn't catch the fish, it snuck into my wagon bed on its own, didn't it? Forget about giving it food; I should be charging it for transport."

But no sooner had he said it, than Lawrence flinched away.

Holo's keen gaze was illuminated by the faintly flickering light of the lamp. She was not joking.

Had he treated her poorly? Or had his agitated state been even more irritating than he'd guessed? Perhaps she hadn't liked his comeback.

"Hmph... What I meant was, don't forget your original intention."

Lawrence didn't know what had triggered this, but he nodded meekly.

Holo could be strangely childish at times, so perhaps she was annoyed at the fact that not only had Lawrence failed to be flustered but had actually counterattacked.

Perhaps realizing her own fault, she backed off.

Lawrence gave her a thin, tired smile and sighed.

"There's something irritating about that," said Holo

"It's your imagination... No, perhaps you're right." Lawrence cleared his throat, then looked back at Holo. "Can you see into my mind?" He asked the question he had put to her seriously when they first met.

Holo grinned, then came in close. "Fool."

"Ouch!"

She had kicked his shin.

Holo's smile remained undisturbed as she smoothly walked past Lawrence and put her hand to the door.

"Are you coming?"

Lawrence swallowed the remark that came to mind—that Holo would never have treated him like this when they had first met—and followed her out the door.

She had told him not to forget his original intention, but that was truly impossible.

The words carried heavy significance. Time could never be turned back, and everybody knew there was no such thing as a person who never changed.

Lawrence knew that, so there was no doubt that Holo knew it as well.

"Of course, it's also true that I can easily take your hand only because we've been traveling for so long together. But" —Holo's face was suddenly sad— "do not poets speak of wishing to stay always as they were upon first meeting a lover?"

It was for only the barest moment that Lawrence thought she was being her usual teasing self.

He found himself surprised at Holo's words, at how obviously she wished to turn back time as she became more conscious of the journey's approaching end.

Holo seemed to be always looking far to the future, but that was not actually true.

And yet, Lawrence was touched that it wasn't to the happy times centuries earlier when she first arrived at her village that she wanted to return, nor was it to the time before then, before she began her journey at all.

She had taken hold of him with her left hand. Though it embarrassed him, he curled his fingers around hers as he spoke. "You might be well returning to that time, but for my part, I'd collapse from overwork."

Holo drew closer to him as they descended the stairs. "Worry not, for I would be there at your deathbed," she said with a mali-

cious smile, which Lawrence could only answer with a tired smile of his own.

It was on the way to the first floor that Lawrence realized her words were not entirely a joke.

If Holo was to say that the search for her homeland could be postponed, Lawrence would certainly die before she did. If Holo's journey didn't end, their journey as a pair surely would.

Lawrence suddenly felt like he understood her reasons for not answering when, back in Tereo, he'd asked what her plans were after they reached her homeland.

Such thoughts occupied his mind when they reached the first floor, and Holo let go of his hand. Lawrence was not bold enough to feel comfortable entering a room while holding a girl's hand, even if that girl was Holo. At the same time, though, he did not want to be the one that let go. Her accommodation for his feelings warmed his heart.

It was as though she was answering the question of what would happen when they reached her homeland.

The feeling helped him muster more than his usual amount of gravitas when he greeted Eve and Arold, who were already there. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Well then, shall we begin?" asked Eve in her hoarse voice.

"So, what did you learn from your poking about?" Eve asked.

There was no need to introduce Holo.

What was visible of her face beneath the cloak and her posture and movements on the chair spoke volumes.

Eve's somewhat utilitarian manner was not unreasonable. Selling Holo was not, after all, their ultimate objective, but her affectation was a bit miserly nonetheless.

"I learned that you did indeed sell statues to the Church, that you parted on bad terms, and that fur sales are going to be re-

stricted to cash," said Lawrence, watching Eve carefully for her response. This was a fundamental negotiation tactic.

But on that count, Eve was skilled enough at hiding her face that Lawrence's eyes could not discern much, and he did not expect to learn anything. It was like warming up before hard exercise.

"Based on my experience and intuition as a merchant, I believe that what you've told me is all true, Eve."

"Oh?" came her disinterested, hoarse voice. She seemed to be well accustomed to negotiation.

"But there is one thing I am worried about."

"Which would be?"

"The reason for your angry split with the Church."

There was nothing more pointless than asking that of her, but Lawrence had decided he would try to compare Eve's answer to the information he had already gathered. If it wasn't consistent, he'd know she was lying.

Holo, sitting next to him, could probably also tell whether she was being honest, but relying on Holo to do this was no different than treating her as an oracle. No, if Eve's answer didn't agree with what he was thinking, cutting her off would be the best course.

After all, they would be selling Holo off based on Lawrence's judgment, so the responsibility to make that judgment fell wholly to him, he felt.

"The reason for my split? I suppose you would wonder about that," said Eve, clearing her throat.

He knew her mind would be racing.

Whatever the undesirable outcome of Lawrence withdrawing from the deal might be, it would most certainly mean the failure of the plan.

She was surely trying to guess at what he had seen and heard around town today.

If she was going to lie, her chances of matching up with whatever information Lawrence had gathered today were almost nil.

"The bishop of the church here is a relic of the good old days, a past he can't forget," began Eve. "He's ambitious. In his younger days, he came here as a missionary, enduring hellish hardship, and what got him through it was his goal of becoming powerful and influential. He wants to establish a cathedral here. In other words, he wants to be an archbishop."

"An archbishop—" The word was practically synonymous with power.

Eve nodded and continued. "As I said before, I may have fallen into disgrace, but I'm nobility. When I began searching this area for good business opportunities, I heard tell of a bishop turning an untoward profit. It was the bishop here. At the time, he was using a trade company as a front and using tithes to get in on the fur trade, but in the end, he just shut himself up in his church and counted figures. He was getting deeper and deeper in the red. So I proposed a way to kill two birds with one stone."

"And that would be the statue trade."

"Exactly. And I didn't just sell him statues. I'm nobility of the kingdom of Winfiel, after all. I can still speak to those in power. I put him in contact with the archbishop there, whose power base is unshakable."

Lawrence found himself nodding internally.

If that was true, then the statues were probably made by the same traveling stonemasons that the archbishop brought together to maintain his cathedral. Once the repairs to the intricate masonry of a cathedral were complete, they would normally either move on to another town or do piecemeal work.

But even so, the amount of certain types of work is limited, which can be a source of friction between groups of masons in an area. And ironically, it was the itinerant stonemasons, who spent

time polishing their skills, who were by far the most capable, and they were the only ones who could handle the maintenance on the intricate stonework of the cathedrals.

So in towns that had a cathedral, whenever it required repair, the local stoneworkers worried about having their business stolen and being made superfluous.

Which was how Eve's business, based as it was on stonework, helped ease that concern.

It was a bridge between the cathedral that wanted to hire traveling masons only when they were needed, the town, and the traveling masons themselves. Eve was then able to tell the archbishop there that the bishop in Lenos wanted to make his acquaintance and then ultimately make a profit moving stone statues from one town to another.

It was an ideal situation; one in which all parties profited.

"I'm glad you understand. That will make this easier to explain. It's as you've said. The reason I contented myself with the thin margins I made by selling statues was because I was counting on the bishop here to become an archbishop. But then—"

Lawrence could not tell whether the edge that crept into Eve's voice was an act or a result of her suppressed anger.

But so far all the facts fit; Eve's story was all too plausible.

"As the bishop profited from his deal with me and solidified his position, people around him started to divine what his goal was, and the bishop set about eliminating obstacles. The current affair was just a convenient excuse for him to cut me off. He owed me. He probably thought that the longer I was around, the more unfavorable demands I would make of him. And of course, I had planned to do exactly that. It was my right. But he decided he'd rather deal with an already-established trade firm instead of a single merchant just trying to establish herself. Even I can understand the reasoning, but that doesn't mean I agree with it."

Lawrence mused to himself that anger burned as visibly as any flame.

"So we argued, and we split," finished Eve.

Sitting next to Lawrence, Holo was so quiet that it was easy to forget she was there.

Lawrence went over Eve's story again in his head.

It seemed to be entirely consistent. So consistent, in fact, that it made him suspicious.

If it was a lie, it was a good enough one that he almost wouldn't mind working with her anyway.

"I see. So that's what made it hard for you to turn your statues into cash and why you can't very well just wait for next year's northern campaign."

Eve's silence beneath her cowl contrasted starkly with her previous garrulity.

Lawrence took a slow, quiet breath.

He closed his eyes.

If he was going to doubt even this consistent of a story, any other deal would be difficult as well.

On the other hand, he might just be fooling himself.

Only merchants, constantly scheming and being schemed upon, had to worry about such things.

"Understood," he said, exhaling the breath he had been holding.

He noticed Eve's shoulders move ever so slightly.

He was confident that this wasn't an act on her part.

No merchant was capable of remaining completely expressionless in such moments.

"Let's discuss the particulars of the deal," he finished.

"...Yes, let's."

Lawrence got the sense that in the shadow of her cowl, Eve smiled.

She extended her hand.

Lawrence took it; it was trembling ever so slightly.

* * *

Subsequently, Lawrence and Eve with Holo in tow ventured out into the town.

Their expedition was not to celebrate their newly established contract. Merchants do not celebrate anything until profit is in their hands.

There was no way of knowing exactly when the Council of Fifty would make their decision public and unleash the rush of merchants trying to monopolize the fur trade, so they needed to secure the necessary cash as quickly as possible.

So out into the town they went to call upon the trading firm that would lend them the money with Holo as collateral.

The trading firm was called the Delink Company.

Though it was situated conveniently close to the port, the building was rather small and had no loading dock.

The only thing that identified it as a trading company was a small flag hanging unobtrusively in the doorway.

However, the building's stone construction was so fine that not even a single hair could slip between the stones, and though it was fully five stories tall, it did not seem to lean against the adjoining buildings.

As Lawrence examined the flag more closely, which was dimly lit by the flickering light of an oil lamp, he could see that it was an embroidered piece of the highest quality. Set against mist-gray stones, it gave the trading house the presence of a small giant, not some come-lately business.

Lawrence wondered if this company's approach to publicity was different from other houses'.

"I'm Luz Eringin, representative for the Delink Company."

Merchants who dealt with different goods had widely varying customs.

Four men from the Delink Company came out to greet Lawrence and his entourage, each of them dressed fit to represent their company, not a one of them standing out among the others.

Lawrence had heard that groups dealing in human commodities always had multiple people judge the quality of their goods. These four were no doubt the managers of the company.

"I am Kraft Lawrence."

Lawrence shook hands with Eringin.

The man's hands were strangely soft, and a vague smile stuck to his face, making it impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Sheep merchants had loud voices like a barking dog. So was this the smile of a slave trader?

Holo shook hands with him next, and his eyes as he regarded her were reptilian—a lizard's or a snake's.

Eve removed her cowl but exchanged no particular greetings. Perhaps this firm had brokered the deal when she had been sold to that newly rich merchant.

"Do have a seat," invited Eringin, and they all sat on felt-covered chairs, fine ones, stuffed with cotton. "I have already heard the particulars from the honorable head of the Bolan house."

"So let's not waste time with empty chitchat," he seemed to be saying.

Lawrence had no intention of negotiating the price. He knew nothing about the market for young noble girls.

"I would ask you one thing," said Eringin. "I have heard that you, Mr. Lawrence, are a member of the Rowen Trade Guild?"

The three men behind Eringin stood there without so much as twitching, staring at Lawrence.

While none of them wore any particular expression, they collectively gave off an aura that was altogether unsettling.

Even Lawrence, well used to signing contracts, felt the pressure.

Perhaps it was a technique of theirs; having been sold off to this company, one would have a hard time lying to them.

"Yes," answered Lawrence briefly, and the oppressive aura of the three men immediately vanished.

It seemed they truly had been trying to wring the truth out of him.

"Rowen, then. I do believe Lord Goldens has dealt with you many times. Perhaps it was he from whom I heard yours is a keen-eyed guild."

Lawrence couldn't help being unsettled at the mention of one of the guild's central figures—even though he knew Eringin brought it up to make Lawrence feel as though escape was impossible.

"If you're attached to such a guild, you're a man to be reckoned with indeed, and your companion is a girl from the nobility. Now, if I might explain what the four of us have decided."

Eve said she wanted 2,500 pieces.

Eringin's affected smile widened.

In any world, it was those with money who were strong.

"Two thousand pieces of *trenni* silver."

It fell short of the goal, but with two thousand in their war chest, the plan would yield incredible success.

It was all Lawrence could manage not to broadcast the way the strength drained from his nervous body. Eve seemed to be doing likewise.

She forced her face to be expressionless.

"Ms. Eve proposed 2,500, but we're unable to deal in that amount with individual merchants. This is for that... fur business that's going around, is it not? Thus, in exchange, we will waive our standard commission and lend you the full amount. But as we do not have that much silver on hand at the moment, the remittance will be in the form of sixty gold *lumione*."

A single piece of *lumione* gold was worth roughly thirty *trenni*.

Lawrence wasn't sure of the details of Lenos's marketplace, but when used in exchange for goods besides other currencies, the *lumione* possessed a singular might.

Depending on the circumstances, it might garner significantly more fur than two thousand *trenni* would have.

But what surprised Lawrence even more was the fact that they were willing to lend the lump sum.

The mere possession of high-value coins held value. Gold or silver currency was a versatile asset that could be melted down if necessary and was far superior to records of money on paper.

When one signed one's name to paper and borrowed money, it was usual to have to pay a fee as well.

But not this time.

"That's generous of you," murmured Eve.

"This is an investment," said Eringin, deepening his smile. "You're a clever person. You've managed to pull profit from the state and arrangement of this town. There is little doubt you will use this success to reach still greater heights, and we wish to share that good luck. And" —he turned to Lawrence—"you are a fortunate man. It was nothing less than good fortune that led you two to meet. And you are not losing yourself to excitement about a deal this large. We believe this is because you've become accustomed to good luck. In our business, the element of fortune is a very important one. Unless one is accustomed to such fortune, one can make mistakes. On that count, we trust you."

Even as Lawrence admired the man's method of estimating value, it did not escape him that the only thing being praised about him was his good luck.

He tried to decide whether to feel pleased or aggrieved and suddenly got the sense that beside him, Holo was snickering at his expense.

"Our job is not unlike prospecting for a gold mine. To find partners, we won't shrink away from investing some money."

"So, how are we to accept the money that will silence so many wagging tongues?"

Eringin smiled at Eve's question, and for the first time, he seemed sincere. "You'll be buying up fur from the Arkieh Company, correct? You certainly have a good eye. I would love for you to tell us your secret—"

"My voice is a bit hoarse these days. Makes it hard to talk," said Eve.

It did not sound like a joke. Eve's words were hard, and Eringin's words were sly and menacing, like a snake.

It was a strange conversation, different from any Lawrence had experienced before.

Of course, there was no need for negotiating parties to get along particularly well, but basic human courtesy was lacking between these two.

As long as they made their money, each cared not one whit for the other's welfare.

It was as obvious as air.

"The transaction? That will be at your preference."

"What do you want to do?" Eve asked, looking at Lawrence for the first time.

They hadn't conferred ahead of time, so Lawrence said what came to mind.

"'Tis hard to sleep with such brightly glittering coins lighting the darkness." It was Holo's presence next to him that helped him straighten up a bit and manage a thin smile.

Eringin made an impressed face, then smiled, shrugging. "A memorable answer! As one handles larger and large amounts of money, one's pride rises as well. Such freedom makes it easy to become haughty and sarcastic. But your words, modest yet

incisive—that is true freedom. We must all learn from your example."

Did Eringin handle such terrifying amounts of money on a daily basis? Even the service charge on two thousand silver pieces would be a significant sum, but he had waived it without a second thought.

When a merchant rose in the world, was this what awaited?

"Well then, shall we remit it to you immediately before you go to buy up your fur?"

Wondering what Eve was thinking, Lawrence didn't immediately answer in order to give her a chance to speak up if she chose—but ultimately, she said nothing.

"Yes, if you please," said Lawrence.

"Very well." Eringin extended his hand to shake.

Lawrence accepted it. The handshake was ever so slightly stronger than the one that had preceded it.

Instead of turning to Holo, Eringin faced Eve and offered his hand, which Eve accepted. Despite the sharp negotiations, it seemed there remained the barest hint of civility.

"Let us pray for a successful transaction," said Eringin, closing his eyes, though it did not seem as though he believed in any sort of god.

There was something divine about that spirit, that merchant's spirit that pursued profit above all else and trampled any god in its path.

"An unpleasant man," declared Eve as they left the trading house after having signed various papers.

Her words brimmed with such feeling that Lawrence found this a bit unusual.

"I've never met his like before. It made me realize just how small a merchant I am," confessed Lawrence honestly. Eve looked at him past her cowl and was silent for a time.

"...Do you really think so?" asked Eve.

"Yes. Here I struggle to make a few hundred silver pieces, but now I've seen an entirely different level."

"And yet you managed to have quite the wit with him."

"Oh, that business about the gold coins?"

Eve nodded and began to slowly walk.

Lawrence took Holo's hand and followed his new partner. Holo seemed to have perfectly understood the role she was to play and had been obediently silent the entire time. When Lawrence took her hand, though, he noticed it was hot.

She must not have liked Eringin's gaze, either.

"It was quite refreshing to hear such wit," said Eve. "You threw Eringin off balance. He won't underestimate a traveling merchant again."

"I'm honored," answered Lawrence. He heard Eve's rough laugh.

"Are you sure you're not the son of some wealthy merchant house?"

"There are evenings when I feel like that."

"I give up," murmured Eve, and for once, the eyes beneath her cowl were not harsh as she spoke. "Are you not thirsty after such speech?"

They hadn't completed the entire deal, but the first barrier had been overcome.

Lawrence was not so dry as to disagree.

Even after nightfall, there were many stalls still selling liquor near the docks.

Lawrence ordered three cups of wine, and the three of them sat on discarded packing crates nearby.

"Here's to success," said Eve, raising her cup in a toast.

The three of them merely pretended to bump their chipped wooden cups together before drinking the wine.

"I suppose it's a bit late to be asking this—," started Eve.

"What's that?"

"Where did you pick up your companion?"

"Wha—?"

Lawrence was unable to conceal his surprise but not because he was relaxing after tense negotiations.

It was simply because he had never expected Eve to care about such things.

"Is it that odd for me to ask?" inquired Eve with a rueful grin. Thankfully, Holo merely held her earthen cup in both hands and said nothing. "I did say I wouldn't pry, but I am curious."

"Yes, well... people often ask."

"So where did you pick her up? I won't be surprised if you tell me she's the daughter of some rich landlord, overthrown in a peasant uprising."

It was the kind of joke that could only have come from Eve, herself being fallen nobility, but even so it was surprising. Lawrence heard a faint swishing sound coming from Holo's back, and ever so casually, he stepped on her foot.

"Evidently she was born in the north. She lived for a long time in the wheat fields of the south."

"Oh?"

"I'd done many deals in a town in the area, so I stopped in on my travels to see a friend, but then she snuck into my wagon bed."

Thinking back to that time, Lawrence realized Holo had been snuggled in among the furs he'd been hauling at the time.

Perhaps her tail gave her some kind of strange connection to fur.

"She said she wanted to return to her homeland, and after various twists and turns, I wound up acting as her escort."

It was a simple story to relate. There were no lies. Holo nodded, and Eve took a sip of her wine.

"Sounds like an encounter dreamt up by some two-copper bard," she said.

Lawrence had to laugh.

It was true, after all.

And yet what had happened after that was something that couldn't be turned into money.

It was absurd, it was delightful, and Lawrence wanted it to continue for the rest of his life.

"It's those twists and turns that I wonder about," said Eve. "But I doubt you'd even tell that to a priest."

"I certainly couldn't tell a priest would be more accurate."

It was the truth, and yet what Lawrence meant and what Eve assumed were two very different things.

Eve laughed loudly, but the port was not so quiet as to give someone cause to turn and look.

"Well, you've surely dressed her nicely. It's clear enough it was an encounter you cherish."

"The moment I let my guard down, she bought them herself."

"I don't doubt it. She seems a clever girl."

No doubt the clever girl was smiling to herself beneath her hood.

"And you seem to get along well," continued Eve. "Though I'd recommend you keep your voices just a bit lower in the inn."

Lawrence's hand froze just short of bringing his wine cup to his lips. For a moment he wondered if he and Holo's exchanges had been audible to others in the inn, but then he realized Eve was trying to trick him into revealing something.

Holo now stepped on his foot, as if telling him not to fall for the trick.

"It's to be treasured. Money can buy companionship but not its quality."

Lawrence's gaze strayed to what lay beneath Eve's cowl.

Her blue eyes peered out at him—a rare, fine blue they were.

"The rich merchant who bought me was a terrible man," she said, looking away, glancing at Holo before her eyes strayed to the docks. It was her self-loathing smirk that finally drove Lawrence's gaze away from her profile. "If I claimed not to want your sympathy, I'd be lying, but it's ancient history now. And he died soon after."

"Is that... so."

"Yeah. You probably know this, but in my homeland, it's the wool trade that prospers. He made a fortune competing with foreign rivals in wool futures, and just when he'd gotten gold sufficient to boost his own status, he went bankrupt when the king changed policies. The deal was huge, an unbelievable amount to fallen nobles like us, who had trouble even buying bread. But he was a proud man, prouder even than the nobility, so when his ruin was certain he slit his own throat. That was the only part about him worthy of the Bolan name."

Eve spoke with neither anger nor sadness nor grim amusement at the fate of her nouveau riche master. She sounded almost nostalgic.

If this was an act, Lawrence would never be able to believe anyone again.

"The marriage ceremony was grand. My butler cried, saying how it was one of the finest in the history of the Bolan house. Of course, to me it was a funeral. But there were good things about it. I didn't have to worry about how I would eat. And I didn't get pregnant."

Blood ties were more important to the nobility than to anyone else.

Children were not gifts from God, but rather political tools.

"And nobody saw me stealing money from his coin purse, bit by bit. Once he was bankrupt and the entire household was forfeit, it was enough for me to start on my own as a merchant."

To have enough wealth to buy a noble family outright, he must have owned a grand trading house indeed.

For a noble girl like Eve to choose the path of the merchant, she must have had the help of those within the firm so that she could arrange such things.

"It's my dream, you see, to build something bigger than him and his company," said Eve plainly. "It was only good luck that allowed him to buy me. In truth, I'm not so cheap as to be bought by a merchant like him, and I want to prove it. Childish, no?" she asked in her hoarse voice, and when she smiled, her face looked very young indeed.

When they shook hands agreeing to do this deal, her hand had been shaking.

No one was perfect. In this world, everyone had a weakness.

"Ha, please, forget all this. Sometimes I just feel like I want to talk about it, that's all. I suppose it means I've a ways to go yet," said Eve, draining her wine cup and burping quietly. "No, that's not it."

She lifted the edge of her cowl up. Lawrence wondered as to her aim.

"I was jealous of you two," said Eve. Her blue eyes narrowed and were bright.

Lawrence wondered how to answer and finally escaped into his wine cup.

Holo would make fun of him for it, no doubt.

Eve chuckled. "How absurd. What we should be worrying about is profit. Am I wrong?"

Lawrence looked at his reflection in the wine.

Just like Eve's, it was not the face of a merchant.

"Right you are," he said, tossing back his wine. He dreaded hearing what Holo would have to say about this later, but as Eve raised her voice in a short, dry laugh, both of them stood and resumed their proper merchant expressions.

"We'll make for the deal as soon as the council announces its decision. Keep Arold informed as to your location."

"I shall."

Eve was every inch the rugged merchant as she extended her hand to him. "This deal will go well," she said.

"Of course," said Lawrence, taking her hand.

Lawrence remembered Holo's reply, back upon entering Lenos, when he had told her not to become angry should they happen to find wolf fur.

He wasn't worried about himself, but he could not be at peace with someone he knew was being hunted.

That seemed to apply to business, too.

Buying a child to adopt into a family or buying a slave to use for labor... this was a necessary trade and not something anyone questioned.

But to even briefly consider the thought of actually selling Holo put Lawrence's heart into disarray. He felt as though he understood for the first time the Church's fussy denouncement of the slave trade.

Once they returned to the inn, Eve remained on the first floor, saying she was going to drink with Arold.

Holo was the only one involved in this affair to collapse onto the bed, a worn-out expression on her face.

"That was certainly an aggravating way to spend time," she declared.

Lawrence smiled wearily as he lit the tallow lamp. "You were as meek as a kitten."

"Well, this 'kitten' is what you're borrowing money on. I had no choice."

Lawrence had decided he could trust Eve's story, and in return, Eve had helped the deal proceed smoothly. As long as nothing un-



expected happened, it wasn't blind optimism to believe that their fur deal would be successful and that their coin purses would soon swell with money.

No one would laugh at him for prematurely feeling that fuzzy warmth in his stomach of which the beggar had spoken.

It had been a very long time since he had felt that sensation.

After all, his long-held desire of being a town merchant was finally beginning to materialize.

"You were a great help," said Lawrence, stroking his chin lightly. "Thank you."

Holo looked at him in a none-too-friendly manner. She flicked her ears as if to brush the dust from them, sighed resignedly, then rolled over from lying on her back to her front and opened a book.

Yet in truth, she seemed a bit bashful.

"Was there anything that worried you?" asked Lawrence.

Holo wriggled out of her robe as she looked at the book, a task Lawrence good-naturedly helped her with. She was not being difficult, so his guess that she was felt bashful about his thanks was probably not far from the mark.

"There were many things that bothered me. There is a saying that there's a demon who sings an ill-omened song buried at the crossroads."

"I've heard that one."

"Oh?" Her hair spilled out like oil over water after having taken her cloak off. She gathered it up.

"There are traveling musicians who carry instruments and wander from town to town, and sometimes they're accused of being servants of a demon and blamed for bringing bad luck or sickness with them. And the place where they hang such musicians is always the crossroads outside of town."

"Oh ho." Holo's sash, undone, had slipped off onto her tail;

Lawrence took it off as she tried to brush it free. She nuzzled her tail as if in thanks.

When he playfully made as if to touch it himself, she dodged quickly away.

"Then, once the demon musician is dead, they wish for its spirit to go haunt some other place. That's why crossroads near towns are kept so carefully free of stones with holes in the road quickly filled. If someone were to stumble there, it's said the buried demon could come back to life."

"Hmph. Humans believe all sorts of things," muttered Holo, seeming genuinely impressed, then turned her attention back to her book.

"Do wolves have no superstitions?"

"..."

Holo was suddenly serious, making Lawrence wonder if he had accidentally stepped on her tail, but she seemed to be simply thinking. After a time, she looked over at him.

"Now that you mention it, I've realized—we don't."

"Well, it's nice you've nothing that stops children from being able to pee at night."

Holo looked stunned for a moment, then laughed.

"Just so you know, I'm not talking about me," Lawrence added.

"Heh." Holo smiled, her tail wagging.

Lawrence patted her head ever so lightly, and she ducked away as though it tickled.

He then casually placed his hand on her head.

He was sure his hand would be swatted away, but Holo let it stay there, her ears moving slightly. Through his hand, Lawrence could feel the warmth of her body, just a fraction taller than a child's.

The room was so quiet as to be sad. This time was precious.

Then, as if she was finally prepared, Holo abruptly spoke.

"You never asked me if her words were true."

She had to be talking about Eve.

Lawrence removed his hand from Holo, his only reply a nod.

Holo did not so much as look at him. His gesture was all she needed.

"As though if you had, I would've teased you, looked down on you, made fun of you. Then I would've told you, and you'd owe me."

"It was a close shave, indeed," said Lawrence.

Holo smiled happily.

She let her head drop to the bed, then looked over at him.

"I understand why it is that you're trying to determine everything for yourself. Selling me is making you feel a strange sense of responsibility, isn't it? But I also know that people aren't that strong. If they have a way of knowing for certain what the truth is, they'll want to use it. And yet you don't—why?"

Lawrence wanted to know what Holo's intention was in asking this, but as clumsy attempts to get this out of her would only end badly, he answered honestly.

"If I forget the distinction there, you'll be the one that gets angry."

"...You're so honest. Why don't you try relying on me a bit more?"

Once he started wholly relying on her, the threshold for doing so would certainly drop.

People could become accustomed to anything. It took the self-awareness of a saint not to forget that.

"I'm not so clever," said Lawrence.

"You can get used to anything with practice." The hair that Lawrence had put in order swished quietly as it spilled out again. "Would you like to practice?"

"Practice relying on you?" Lawrence retorted playfully. Holo's gently waving tail gradually stopped moving.

She closed her eyes, then opened them slowly. Her smile was gentle, as though she would forgive any mistake.

Her face said that she would accept any way Lawrence could think of to rely on her.

If she was doing this to tease him, then it was a cruel joke indeed.

Who would fault him for being caught by something like this?

Thus Lawrence's mind became still colder.

He went so far as to consider if this actually showed how irritated she was and if this was all a trap to try and get him to smile.

It seemed Holo's main goal was to enjoy watching him like this.

Eventually he grinned, a touch maliciously.

"Are you telling me not to set such a nasty trap? I'm not angry," said Holo.

"If you are, you are."

"Well then, this time 'tis no trap. Practice relying on me as much as you like."

"... That's just what you'd say, isn't it?"

Lawrence shrugged as Holo snickered, then lay her head down on her arms once she was done laughing.

"Being read by you—I'm a disgrace as a wisewolf."

"Even I learn eventually."

Holo neither laughed nor looked frustrated, but there was the barest hint of a smile on her face as she pointed to the corner of the bed.

"Sit," she seemed to say. "Ah, but you're just as softhearted as you ever were."

Lawrence sat on the corner of the bed as Holo sat up and continued.

"Even if I lure you into a trap and laugh my fill, and you become angry, you'll still not exhaust your patience with me."

Lawrence smiled. "Well, I don't know about that." *So you'd best*

mind yourself in the future, he was going to add but thought better of it, because when he expected Holo to smile her invincible smile and come back with her usual wit, she instead seemed sad.

"No, you will not. I know it," she murmured, before doing something completely unexpected.

She sat up and inched over to Lawrence's side, then sat herself sideways on his lap. Having accomplished that, she wrapped her arms around him without any hesitation.

Her face pressed against his left shoulder.

He couldn't see her expression.

Despite this frank display, Lawrence didn't think she was planning anything untoward.

"'Tis a truth that people change over time. Even a little while ago, you'd be frozen in fright if I were to do this kind of thing."

No matter what Holo was trying to feign, her ears and tail never lied.

Between the sound of her tail and the way it felt as it brushed against his left hand, Lawrence could tell that it was waving uncertainly.

He grabbed hold of it lightly.

That instant, Holo flinched and stiffened. He let go immediately.

Before he could apologize, her head roughly bumped into the side of his. "No careless touching!"

From time to time, Holo would claim that she would let him touch her tail as some sort of reward, but this seemed to be a weak point of hers.

Ascertaining that had not been Lawrence's goal nor was he motivated by simple mischief.

He didn't know the cause, but inasmuch as Holo did not seem to be completely dispirited, he felt slightly relieved.

"Fool," she added, sighing.

Silence descended.

The intermittent sound of Holo's swishing tail mingled with the quiet crackling sound of the tallow lamp's wick.

Just as Lawrence was wondering if he should say something, Holo spoke.

"I truly am a failure as a wisewolf, having you fret over me so."

She must have sensed that he was about to speak.

Her words seemed to Lawrence like simple bravado, but perhaps that was just his imagination.

"Honestly, me relying on you is another story entirely. We were speaking of you relying upon me!"

She lifted her head from his shoulder and straightened, her eyes now slightly higher than Lawrence's.

Those red-brown eyes looked down at him, and her lip twisted in irritation. "When will you get flustered for me?"

"I might if you would tell me what you're truly thinking about."

Immediately Holo drew away, her face contorted as though she had tasted something bitter.

Yet when Lawrence failed to seem concerned, she soon seemed sad. "Come, now—," she said quietly.

"What?"

"I want you flustered."

"Fine then," answered Lawrence, and Holo once again leaned against his chest, completely still.

"Can we not end our travels here?" she murmured.

If Lawrence had wanted to explain to someone else the surprise he felt at that moment, they would have to have seen him.

He was so surprised; that was the only thing that occurred to him.

But then what he felt was anger.

This was the one joke he never wanted to hear.

"Do you think I jest?"

"I do," replied Lawrence instantly but not because he was composed.

It was quite the opposite. He grabbed Holo's shoulders and held her at arm's length, facing her.

She smiled but not in a way that Lawrence could be angry at.

"You really are quite charming."

Lawrence muttered under his breath that she could only say such things if she tickled his chin and smiled her devilish smile as she did so.

"I am quite serious. If I were to say such a thing in jest, you would become truly angry." Lawrence still held her shoulders; she covered his hands with hers and continued. "But you'll forgive me, because you're kind."

Holo's fingers were slender, and her nails, while not properly sharp, were a lovely shape.

And when they bore down on the back of his hands, they hurt.

But even scratched so, Lawrence did not remove his hands from her shoulders. "My contract with you... it was to escort you to your homeland."

"We are nearly there."

"So why here, now—"

"People change. Situations change. And my mood also changes."

After Holo spoke, she smiled a regretful smile, and Lawrence knew she was ruing her own pitiful visage.

For just a moment, he felt terror.

Was this something she would decide simply on a whim?

Holo giggled. "It seems there are fields yet untilled. But this is no place to be treading with one's boots on."

It was too late for her to be teasing Lawrence and enjoying his visibly flustered mien, but as he grew more and more resistant to her joking, her methods became more extreme in order to compensate.

But just as Holo had said, this was one place he didn't want her to play.

"Why this, all of a sudden?" he asked.

"'Tis just as that fox said."

"...Eve?"

Holo nodded and removed her fingernails from the backs of Lawrence's hands.

A tiny bit of blood welled up; Holo apologized with her eyes and continued. "Money can buy companionship, but..."

"...But not its quality?"

"Aye, and so she said to treasure your encounters. That mere human girl, thinking herself so great..." Holo put Lawrence's hand to her cheek. "I want our meeting to be something good. And so I think it is best that we part here."

Lawrence did not understand what she was saying.

Back in Tereo, Holo had avoided the question of what she would do upon reaching her homeland.

Lawrence had felt this was because worry hung between them that once they arrived there, their journey together would end.

That much was only natural given the nature of their promise, and when he'd first met Holo, Lawrence had assumed that was what would happen. Surely Holo had felt similarly.

But the journey had been a joy, and he wanted to extend it, if only by a day.

He was driven unavoidably by that childish wish.

And was Holo not the same? At the very least, Lawrence felt he could look back on their travels and be certain of that much.

So how did ending their journey here follow from the idea that relationships needed to be treasured?

When Lawrence looked at her with obvious bewilderment, Holo smiled sadly, still holding his hand to her cheek.

"You fool. Do you still not understand?"

She was neither teasing nor angry. Holo looked at him as she would look at a particularly difficult child, her frustration tinged with affection.

He took his hand from her cheek as she looked up, slowly embracing her once again.

"This journey has been truly wonderful. I've laughed, cried... This cunning old wolf has even screamed in anger from our fights. I had been alone for so long, so these days have been very bright indeed. I've even wished that they would go on forever."

"So just—," Lawrence began to say, but the words stopped in his throat.

It was a conversation he could not have.

After all, Holo was not human. Their life spans were too different.

"You're very clever, but you lack so much experience. Since you're a merchant who toils for profit, I thought you would soon understand, but... I'm not saying this because I don't want to watch you die. I've... already become used to that idea," said Holo smoothly like a winter wind blowing across a brown, withered field.

"If I'd had a bit more self-restraint, I might just have endured until my homeland. I had been confident of that when we put the last village behind us, but... you're simply too softhearted. You accept everything that I do and give me anything I wish for. It's terrible to endure it... just terrible."

Lawrence was not the least bit happy to hear these words from Holo, which sounded like something one would find on the last page of some chivalrous tale.

He still did not understand what Holo was saying, but there was something he did understand.

He knew that at the end of all her words would come these: "So let us part here."

"It is just... too frightening," she said.

Her tail was puffed up to match her rising uncertainty.

She had said the same thing after eating the roast pig—that she was scared.

At the time he had not understood, but given all this, there was only one thing that could frighten her so much.

But Lawrence did not understand why it scared her so.

She wanted him to understand this.

That night, she had said it would be troublesome if he understood, but now that the conversation had come to this point, it was quite clear she had decided that the opposite was true.

Holo was a wisewolf. She did not do pointless things, and she was very rarely wrong.

So this had to be something he could understand from what he had been presented with here.

Lawrence's mind raced.

His keen memory, which was a point of pride for Lawrence as a merchant, worked to recollect everything.

Eve's words. Holo suddenly wanting to leave. Something that being a merchant, he should be able to understand. And Holo's fear.

None of them seemed to have anything to do with one another, and he didn't have the faintest idea how they connected.

Wasn't the fact that the journey had been bright and joyful reason enough to want it to continue?

Every journey came to its end, but Holo surely wasn't trying to evade that inescapable fact. She should have understood that all along; Lawrence certainly did. He was confident that at the journey's proper end, they would part with smiles.

There had to be some meaning to her wanting to abandon the journey in the middle.

The middle of the journey. This particular opportunity. Because she couldn't hold out until they reached her homeland...

When he got that far, Lawrence began to feel like he was finding the connections.

Joyful. Journey. Timing. Merchant.

He froze, stricken, unable to hide the shock he felt.

"Have you realized?" she asked with a measure of exasperation, removing herself from Lawrence's lap and standing. "In truth, I would have preferred you not to, but if I let it go any longer, I'd lose the best chance. You understand, don't you, what I mean by this?"

Lawrence nodded.

He understood all too well.

No. He had vaguely known all along. He just hadn't wanted to accept it.

Holo drew away from Lawrence without betraying much reluctance, then stood from the bed.

Watched by those red-brown eyes of Holo's, he murmured, "Even you haven't seen such a tale?"

"Tale? Whatever do you mean...? Oh, I see. You're quite clever with your words."

Broadly speaking, there were two types of tales in the world. Some tales had happy endings while others had unhappy endings.

In truth, there were really four types, but the remaining two were too difficult for humans to create, and humans were too imperfect to understand them.

If there were any who could create and read those tales, that would be a god, and it was that which the Church promised after death.

"Stories where they live happily ever after," said Lawrence.

Holo walked wordlessly over to the corner of the room, picking up the pitcher of wine that sat there next to their things. When she looked back, she smiled. "There is no such thing. Of course, I enjoy speaking with you. I enjoy it too much—so much I just want to eat you up."

If Lawrence had heard her say this when they'd first met, if he had looked into her narrowed, red-tinged eyes then, there was no doubt he would have been afraid.

And yet now he felt no particular worry.

Holo wanted to return to the way they were when they had first met. That fact pierced his heart.

"But no matter how delicious the treat, one cannot go on eating the same thing forever, can they? It becomes tiresome, does it not? And worst of all, as I enjoy it more and more, I'll begin to need more and more stimulation, and then what? You know, don't you, what lies at the top of those stairs?"

Once Lawrence had trembled to hold her hand, but now Holo could embrace him without incident, and he kissed her hand as easily as one could please.

When he counted the things beyond that, Lawrence understood something that terrified him.

In the face of the long time that stretched ahead of them, there was not much they could do.

They could change hands and change goods, but the end would come before they knew it.

They could continue to climb the stairs.

But there was no guarantee those stairs would always exist.

"Eventually I will not be able to get what I crave, and all the talk that was once such a delight will fade, its joy remaining only in memory. And it's then that I will think back to how much fun it was when we first met."

Her unkind look seemed deliberate.

"That is why I was frightened. Frightened of the way it sped the erosion of this delight. The way your"—Holo took a drink of wine from the pitcher—"kindness did," she finished as though accusing herself.

Holo the Wisewolf.

A wolf who had lived for centuries, who had ensured the wheat harvest, and who feared loneliness above all else.

There was an aspect of this fear that was difficult to understand. The way she hated being respected and feared as a god could not be understood simply with reason, Lawrence felt.

Of course, because she lived for such a long time, the number of creatures who lived as long as she did was very low, which made her particularly susceptible to loneliness.

But here and now, Lawrence finally understood the answer, the reason why despite living as long as she did, Holo did not seek out similar creatures to her—no, couldn't.

Holo had said that she was not a god.

And this was the true reason.

God, it was said, had created a heavenly kingdom where neither old age nor sickness existed, where bliss was eternal.

But Holo could do no such thing.

Just like a human, she could only become accustomed to something, then tire of it, passing the dim night thinking, *Ah, it was such fun at first.*

She could not stay happy forever.

And this wisewolf, having lived as long as she had, knew all too well that her simple, girlish wish could never come true.

"I've long been impressed at how clever you humans are to have the saying, 'All's well that ends well.' Though I might think to myself, 'Oh aye, it's quite so,' I still find myself unable to summon the resolve to end something that gives me pleasure. I don't know what would happen if you came with me all the way to my homeland. That's why I wish to end our travels here, so that it can be a delight from start to finish."

Lawrence had no words. He took the pitcher when Holo walked over to him and offered it.

There was nothing positive in her words, yet somehow he heard

a note of resolve in her voice, perhaps because she was close to turning defiant.

"Are you not close to achieving your dream? Is this not the perfect time to bring this chapter of your story to a close?"

"I...suppose so," said Lawrence. It was why he hadn't interrupted her.

"Also, I was thinking of telling you later and surprising you." Holo suppressed a giggle, sitting down next to Lawrence as though the entire conversation had never happened. She twisted around and picked up the book that lay at the bedside. "I was in the book," she said with a strangely rueful smile, which was surely because of Lawrence's surprise upon hearing those words.

Even though he had not betrayed the slightest emotion when she spoke of his dream being near.

"There were all sorts of things in the past, things I'd forgotten about entirely until seeing them," said Holo, flipping through the pages, then turning the book toward Lawrence.

As if to say, "Read."

Lawrence traded the book for the pitcher, dropping his eyes to the page.

The tales, written in a precise, ceremonious hand, were of a time when people still lived in ignorance and darkness.

The name of the Church was nothing more than a mere rumor from a far-off land.

And there, just as the chronicler Diana in the pagan town of Kumersun had said, was Holo's name.

"'Wheaten tail,' they say. Such complicated words," said Holo.

Lawrence felt as though the phrase was not far off the mark but said nothing.

"Looks like you've been a heavy drinker since ancient times," he said, resigned, as he read the relevant section, and far from injuring her mood, Holo puffed out her chest and sniffed proudly.

"I remember it vividly even now. There was a rival drinker, a girl a bit younger than you, and we weren't so much drunk as we were unable to fit any more liquor in. And in the end, it was even more heroic, you see—"

"No thanks. I don't want to hear any more," said Lawrence, waving her off. He didn't even have to think about this in order to know how she had put an end to the contest.

And yet, while there was indeed a tale of a drinking contest, it seemed more like a heroic saga of Holo and the girl she had drunk against than anything else.

Perhaps that wasn't surprising.

Holo giggled. "Ah, but that's nostalgic. And I'd forgotten it entirely until reading it."

"Drinking, eating, singing, dancing. I'm sure it's been rewritten any number of times, but the fun atmosphere still comes through. Surely most of the old legends were comedies."

"Aye. 'Twas a delight. Come now, stand up."

"...?"

Lawrence did as he was told, standing up from the bed.

He then set the book down as Holo directed him to.

Just as he wondered what she was doing, Holo strode toward him and took his hand.

"Right, right, left, left, left, right—you see, do you not?"

He didn't even have to think about this.

It was the ancient dance that Holo had danced in the story.

But when he stood near her, Lawrence understood.

It was obvious what lay beneath her bright exterior.

Holo said that she wanted to stop traveling because it was too much fun.

"This dance is bad if you're drinking, though. Your eyes will start to swim before you know it," she said, looking up at Lawrence and smiling, then dropping her gaze to the floor.

"So it's right, right, left and left, left, right—got it? Right, here we go!"

Lawrence had never danced a proper dance before, although Holo had forced him out into the streets on Kumersun's festival night where he had danced all night.

With that much practice, anyone would be halfway decent.

When Holo cried out "There!" and put her foot out, Lawrence matched her and did likewise.

Norah the shepherdess had done the shepherd's dance to prove her identity. Dances were everywhere. There were countless dances, but they all resembled one another.

Lawrence matched his steps to hers on the first go, which visibly surprised Holo.

"Hmph."

She had probably looked forward to making fun of his clumsiness, thinking it would not go so easily.

Step, step, step... They moved their bodies lightly and easily, and soon it was Lawrence who was leading Holo, her feet being more prone to getting tangled. Once a person understood that this sort of thing was more about confidence than technique, all one needed was audacity.

But Holo's surprise only dulled her movements for a moment.

Soon she was gliding smoothly, occasionally becoming slightly confused in an obviously deliberate manner. Lawrence wondered if she was trying to make him step on her feet.

He would not fall for it, of course.

"Hnn—hmph."

They looked like two puppets whose strings were being controlled in unison. That was how closely their movements matched.

Right, right, left, left, left, right—the movements were simple, but they continued through the steps of the dance there in the small room without stopping once.



It was only when Holo surprisingly stepped on Lawrence's foot that the dance came to an end.

"Whoops—" was all Lawrence had time to say before they fortunately wound up together on the bed.

Their hands remained clasped together.

Lawrence unpleasantly suspected Holo of doing this on purpose, but she looked stunned, as though she had no idea of what had just happened.

At length, she returned to herself and met Lawrence's eyes.

"... What are we doing here?"

"I suspect it would be better not to ask."

Holo ducked her head ticklishly and showed her canines.

She seemed genuinely happy.

Perhaps that is how she found the ability to continue.

"The direction to my homeland was also written."

Lawrence remembered the contents of the book, a smile lingering on his face from their foolish exchange, and nodded.

In the book, it was written that Holoh of the Wheat Tail came from the mountains of Roef, twenty days' journey on foot in the direction of sleep and birth.

North was sleep, and east was birth. Giving meanings to directions like this was not uncommon.

And the most decisive part of the tale was the reference to the mountains of Roef.

Lawrence knew the name.

It was the name of a tributary of the Roam River, which itself flowed past Lenos.

There was very little doubt that within the mountains of Roef were the headwaters of the Roef River. With this much information, Holo could easily find her way home, even on her own.

And Lawrence doubted his expectations were wrong.

His only mistake had been loading that wheat into his wagon bed that day in Pasloe.

"So, have you read them all?" Lawrence asked quickly, lest the silence expose their lies for what they were.

As Lawrence and Holo began to sit up, their joined hands separated.

"I have. The oldest tells the tale of the beginning of this town, of the person who set up the first pillar of the first building for people to live in, though it was uncertain whether he was really a person."

"A friend of yours, then?"

"Maybe." Holo laughed at the banter. "Still," she said, righting herself, "we ought to return the books before we spill wine on them. It's not as though we need to copy them, and most of it was already in my head to begin with."

"Indeed. And there's no guarantee you won't fall asleep on them and get drool all over the pages."

"I do not do such things."

"I know. Just like you don't snore," said Lawrence with a smile, standing up from the bed—pretending as though if he didn't, he was liable to be bitten.

"Would you like me to tell you just what things you talk about in your sleep?" Holo asked, eyes half-lidded.

Lawrence's heart skipped a beat at her words.

It was all he could do to keep the sadness he felt at this exchange from showing on his face.

"I expect it goes something like this: 'I beg you, please, don't eat any more!'"

There were also frequent dreams where he was able to eat as much delicious food as he wanted.

Yet since meeting Holo, he had seen his nightmare of having to foot the bill for someone eating like that come true many a time.

"You're making fully enough to pay for it," retorted Holo, climbing off the bed opposite Lawrence.

As if they were pretending to quarrel.

"Sure, in hindsight. If we hadn't made money in Kumersun, you would literally be devouring all my assets."

"Hmph. Doesn't the saying go, 'If you've eaten poison, you may as well eat the whole dish?' If it came to that, I'd just gobble you up, too." Holo licked her lips theatrically, looking at Lawrence with hunger in her eyes.

He had known this was an act for ages.

But something different lay behind that look that he now understood painfully well.

Somewhere along the line, their bond had been broken. It was very sad, but not so sad that he couldn't bear it.

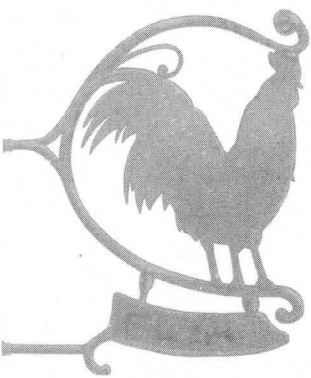
What was saddest was that it was because of a mean-spirited god.

"I'll just bet. So, once we've returned the book, what do you want to eat?" queried Lawrence.

Holo's tail swished as she smiled unpleasantly. "We'll decide that once we're there."

Their conversations, at least, were as fun as they always had been.

CHAPTER FOUR



The next day Holo and Lawrence left the inn shortly past noon, telling Arold that they were going to Rigolo's house but would return.

It seemed unlikely that during the short time they would be out, the council's decision would be made public, but there was always a chance. Arold nodded silently, never taking his eyes off the charcoal fire.

They ventured out into the town, again walking down its cramped, narrow streets.

Unlike the previous time, puddles were in short supply—as was conversation.

Holo asked him over and over again about details of the deal she had long since understood, just to show she was being thoughtful.

"Seems all is going well, then," she finally said.

One of the spots where Lawrence had so gallantly lent Holo his hand to help her cross was gone. In its place was a hole, perhaps dug by some mischievous youngster, and although the water level was lower, it was still a puddle.

Thus, it was the only opportunity Lawrence had to once again extend his hand, which Holo accepted before crossing the hole.

"Yes, all's well. A little too well," he said.

"You've been burned many times in the past," said Holo, eliciting a smile from Lawrence.

His fear was mostly because of the size of the profit that awaited him on the other side of the deal.

He didn't think Eve was laying a trap for him, and in any case, luring someone into a clever setup was not such a simple thing to do.

They were borrowing money, buying up goods, and selling them at a profit—that was all.

As long as their trading succeeded, there was naught to worry about.

If she were trying to strong-arm him into some kind of trap, like forcibly stealing the goods from him midway, she wouldn't have suggested a ship for transport.

The river was a more important trade route than the road, and many vessels plied it.

It would be nearly impossible for a robbery to be carried out along it without someone noticing.

There really seemed to be no problems.

"How many thousands did my body fetch, I wonder?"

"Mm, about two thousand."

More properly, this was the amount fetched by Eve's house name, not Holo's body.

"Oh ho. How much wine would that buy?"

"An unbelievable amount of the finest quality."

"And you're going to take that money and profit with it, yes?"

Holo was demanding her cut, and Lawrence had every intention of giving it to her.

"If all goes well, I'll treat you to as much drink as you like."

Holo giggled. "Then I'll have...," she began but then hastily closed her mouth.

After a moment of confusion, Lawrence realized what she was going to say.

Then I'll have enough to stay drunk my whole life.

But that was an impossible dream.

"Then I'll have...enough so that I start vomiting even before I'm drunk," said Holo the Wisewolf.

Lawrence the traveling merchant could hardly fail to retort, "What? You lost the drinking game?"

"Yes...Still, that's quite natural. Think about it, will you? My opponent was not as beautiful as I, but she still had looks enough—and poured such wine into her guts as made her face turn red and her cheeks puff out. Once I, a proud wisewolf, saw what a disgrace I would have to become, I couldn't stop my gorge from rising."

No doubt they had both been "a disgrace," but Holo's vain excuse was undeniably Holo-like. Lawrence had to laugh.

Holo folded her arms and made a sour face. There was a tomboyish innocence about her.

How fun the conversation would have been if it had not all been an act.

"In any case, you seem to enjoy liquor well enough, despite your loss," said Lawrence.

To which Holo answered, "You are only and ever a fool."

When they reached Rigolo's house, he was not there.

Melta received them in her nun's habit as always.

"You were very fast to read them all. It takes me near a month to read even one short tale," she said.

She seemed to speak not out of humility but rather bashfulness, her smile carrying with it an aura of kindness.

Lawrence couldn't help noticing this, but as Melta retrieved the key from Rigolo's desk and led them in, Holo didn't kick him even once.

"Mr. Rigolo said to tell you that if there is anything else

you need, please feel free to borrow it," said Melta, using the key to open the door to the archives, then lighting a beeswax candle.

"Anything you want to read?" Lawrence asked Holo, who nodded vaguely.

"Please do look around, then. No matter how valuable these books, it seems a bit sad to let them go unread," said Melta.

"Thank you very much," said Lawrence, smiling and ducking his head by way of a bow.

Melta's personality seemed entirely genuine, instead of simply being a product of her occupation.

"I should say that the books you borrowed were written by Mr. Rigolo's grandfather, and as such use modern language. Some of the older books, however, use archaic writing styles and may be difficult to read."

Holo nodded at Melta's statement, then took the wax candle from her and proceeded slowly into the archives. Lawrence doubted there were actually any books she wanted to read and assumed Holo just wanted to kill time.

Her dancing with him in the inn, too, must have been something she anticipated in a way.

Even having understood everything, this was fun, and she had anticipated being able to end their journey with smiles.

But he knew that was impossible.

"Er—"

"Yes?" Melta had been watching the candle Holo held, but she now turned to Lawrence.

"I hate to be presumptuous, but would you mind terribly showing me Mr. Rigolo's garden?"

The gloom of the archives was fostering dark thoughts in Lawrence's mind, and he was starting to scare himself.

But Melta showed not so much as a dewdrop of concern. "I'm

sure the flowers in the garden will be pleased to see you," she said with a smile that glowed like the wax candle.

"Holo," Lawrence called out, and her head appeared from behind one of the bookshelves. "Be careful with the books."

"I know, I know."

Melta laughed pleasantly. "It's quite all right. Mr. Rigolo's way of handling them is much worse, I assure you."

Lawrence more or less had the sense that this was true, and having warned Holo, he let Melta lead him out of the archives and back up to the ground floor.

He looked forward to gazing upon that bright garden and thinking about nothing in particular.

"Would you care for something to drink?"

"Ah, er, no—don't trouble yourself." Lawrence waved off Melta's kind offer, and she gave a short bow before quietly leaving the room.

If he had come on business, then his presence would have profited his host as well, so he wouldn't have worried about accepting their kindness. But as it was, Lawrence was presuming upon their good graces and didn't want to accept any more than he had to.

One of the Church's core principles was "give all you are able to."

"Ah, well," he ventured to say, putting an end to the thought. He didn't want to think about anything.

Lawrence turned his eyes to Rigolo's garden.

He had heard that making transparent glass was quite difficult. The price aside, constructing these huge windows must have involved many problems.

On the other side of the wall, through countless pieces of glass all joined together, there was a garden that looked as if it had taken even more work.

It was eerie, seeing the green plants, the white blossoms.

Rigolo had bragged that with some effort, he could preserve such scenery within this room year-round.

If that was true, then Rigolo must have sat at this desk, never bored with the scene that greeted him every time he looked at the garden.

Surely Melta, who seemed to look after Rigolo, must have gazed in fond exasperation at his back.

It made Lawrence frankly jealous. He grinned regretfully at his own folly, then looked back into the study.

It overflowed with papers and parchment and looked quite messy at a glance, though on closer inspection, the room was revealed to be tidy indeed. Rather than calling it a home or workplace, the term *nest* seemed most appropriate, given its scattered state.

Lawrence wondered if it was Eve's closeness to Rigolo that led him to have one of her statues in the room.

Or perhaps he'd had one of the leftovers foisted off on him.

It was packed with cotton in a wooden box, along with a rolled-up piece of parchment that was probably the certificate of consecration from the Church.

The statue was about the size of both of his hands with their fingers outstretched.

Lawrence looked at it closely, wondering how much it went for when he noticed something strange.

The statue's surface was slightly faded.

"What's this?"

In order to improve their appearance, statues were sometimes rubbed with lime and sometimes ink. This statue of the Holy Mother was white, so surely lime had been used on it.

But in a place where that finish seemed to have come off, Lawrence saw something strange.

He rubbed the statue lightly, trying to wipe it clean.

"...This, it can't be—"

"Is something the matter?" The sudden voice brought him back to himself.

He turned around. It was Melta. "Oh, goodness...this is rather embarrassing. I just thought this statue of the Holy Mother was so well made, I could do with having her hear my troubles."

"Goodness." Melta's eyes widened slightly, and she smiled. "I am a lamb in the Church's flock, so I would be happy to hear your worries."

Evidently Melta was not a hardheaded nun.

"I shall restrain myself," said Lawrence.

Melta carried a beautifully carved wooden tray with a compact wooden cup and a metal pitcher on it. "This is a drink made from bread, though I don't know if it will suit you."

The tray and cup had such soft, lovely lines that Lawrence wondered if Melta had made them herself. "Kvass, is it?"

"Goodness, sir merchant, you're quite knowledgeable," answered Melta, pouring a pale brown liquid from the pitcher into the cup.

"It hasn't been popular recently, so you don't see it much these days."

"I myself prefer it to the Blood of God...ah, er—please forget I said that!"

By the "Blood of God," she surely meant grape wine.

For the quiet Melta to make a joke, it was charming indeed.

Lawrence nodded and put his index finger to his lips.

If this were Ruvinheigen or Kumersun or Tereo, he would have treated Melta a bit differently, fearing Holo's revenge.

And yet if asked if he was truly enjoying this conversation, Lawrence would have answered in the negative.

His mind was racing with the knowledge he'd gained from the statue of the Holy Mother.

"Here you go," said Melta, offering him the drink.

Feeling as though Melta's gentle demeanor was a balm on his frayed heart, Lawrence took the cup.

"I take it Mr. Rigolo is at the meeting?"

"Yes. This morning there was an urgent message, and... oh, heavens, I'm sorry, I was told not to say anything about it."

Lawrence flashed his best merchant's smile at the apologetic Melta, shaking his head. "Not at all, and in any case I wouldn't ask about the subject of the meeting. It was a poor choice of topic. I had wanted to ask about the glass here, so it is unfortunate I could not see him again."

"Oh, is that so...? Well, this glass was gathered piece by piece, and it took over three years to collect it all."

"I see. Mr. Rigolo's passion for his garden is clear indeed," said Lawrence with deliberate surprise in his voice. Melta smiled brilliantly, as though she herself had been praised.

Eve had said she didn't understand Rigolo's lack of ambition and his passion for his garden, but with someone as understanding as Melta at his side, he could lose himself in his avocation. Rigolo's days were pleasant ones, Lawrence mused.

"With so much passion, I can understand why he would make such bold declarations as saying he wants to quit his post as the council's secretary."

Melta's smile was troubled as she nodded. "Though it is his job, he stays gazing at the garden until the last possible moment."

"I would say he might as well, but the secretary is an important post."

"God says that labor is valuable. But sometimes I feel that such a modest desire as being able to spend time in one's garden could also come true," said Melta, smiling.

It was a decadent dream that no pious nun should be able to embrace, but perhaps it was the fact that Melta was in love that made her think of it as pleasant.

No matter how Lawrence thought about it, she seemed to be saying that Rigolo's happiness was her happiness.

Perhaps it was Melta's dream to stand by Rigolo's side all day long as he watched his garden, bravely attending to him.

"Ah, but modest desires are the hardest to fulfill."

She laughed. "You may be right." Melta placed her hand to her cheek as she looked out on the bright garden. "And the most joyous times are the ones that you wish would last forever."

Stricken, Lawrence looked long and hard at Melta.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"I'm simply moved by your words."

"You flatter me."

He had been entirely serious, but Melta had taken his sincerity for a joke.

Lawrence wanted Holo to stay. He wanted her to stay forever, but maybe he should simply treasure the time for as long as he felt that way. The thought pierced his chest.

If they were truly always together, if they could always see each other again, perhaps that joy would unavoidably be destroyed.

It was not such a difficult truth.

Because it was so simple, Holo's dream of overturning this was too difficult.

"However, I do believe it's a fortunate thing to be able to pursue a simple dream," managed Lawrence, unable to forget his own reality.

Soon Holo came up from the archives, holding the wax candle.

She said the flame had gone out, but that was surely a lie.

Just as Lawrence had fled, Holo had found the dark corners of the archives distasteful and had escaped.

Lawrence knew this because as soon as Holo entered the room facing the brightly lit garden, she shot him a bitter glance.

Saying nothing, she stood next to him.

Lawrence looked straight at her, and spoke. "Did you find any good books?"

Holo shook her head. Her eyes asked, "Did you?"

Holo was Holo.

She could easily detect the slightest change in his demeanor.

"I had a very useful conversation," said Lawrence.

The next instant, there was the sound of banging on the door.

Following this came the sound of the door opening.

Heavy, graceless footfalls echoed through the house, and then someone appeared.

Melta was shocked, but she did not become angry or flustered at the surprising intrusion, because it was someone she knew well.

It was Eve.

"Come with me," said Eve. "Things are bad."

She was breathing heavily.

"It's an armed uprising."

"Lock your doors, and don't open them for anyone you don't know," said Eve, and Melta nodded, gulping as though she had swallowed a stone.

"Y-yes!"

"I don't care how displeased they are with the council's decision, I doubt they'll come to the secretary's house, so you should be fine," said Eve, giving Melta a light embrace. "And of course, Rigolo will be safe."

Melta nodded pathetically.

She was far more concerned for his safety than for her own.

"Right, let's go."

Eve directed these words to Lawrence and Holo, and Lawrence gave a short nod.

Holo stood a bit away looking disinterested, but Lawrence could tell that her ears were twitching to and fro beneath her

hood. She probably had a good idea of what was going on in the surrounding area.

"We're off, then." Eve stepped out of the door, and Melta clasped her hands as if to pray for their safety.

Eve, Lawrence, and Holo walked down a deserted street at a fast stride that was almost a slow trot. "You said an 'uprising,' but who is it actually?" Lawrence asked.

"The fur craftsmen and the people who supply them their tools and wares."

The first thing Eve had said upon getting to Rigolo's house was, "This is bad."

The trigger had been the council making their decision public earlier than predicted.

Just as the council was trying to set up the wooden plaques that displayed the decision in the town square, the craftsmen and suppliers rushed in wielding their tools in place of weapons, demanding that the council rescind its ruling.

Though to Lawrence the decision seemed like an astute one, he could imagine that those who would find their businesses completely gone the next day could hardly swallow it.

And Eve said the council's decision was based on a naive forecast.

It was hardly surprising that the uncertainty and worry would take the form of a violent uprising. Even if the town's fur industry did survive, the townspeople themselves would be ruined, so it would be meaningless.

News of the uprising had reached the center of town quickly, and it was now apparently in complete disorder.

Lawrence could hear the distant cries and shouts.

He looked to Holo, who nodded.

"The council's decision can't be revoked, can it?" he asked.

Eve shook her head.

The Council of Fifty was an assembly of powerful people from all parts of town, and the decisions they made showed the town's resolve. Such decisions were given preference above all others, and all who lived in Lenos had to abide by them.

If a group whose interests lay in opposition to those of the council denied those decisions, there was the danger that it could severely damage the council's authority and make it difficult for the council to conduct its normal management of the town.

The fur craftsmen were no doubt well aware of that when they decided to revolt.

"The council has to protect its credibility, so the decision will be upheld. The foreign merchants are already coming into the town. The craftsmen are desperate to prevent them from doing so, but it's probably impossible."

Eve walked through the complicated maze of streets without any trouble.

Occasionally they passed others with goals similar to their own. Several times they saw merchants running through the alleys as fast as they could.

Lawrence was worried about whether Holo would be able to keep up, but she seemed fine for the moment. She held on to Lawrence's hand, careful to stay close.

"And our fur deal?" asked Lawrence.

"The council's decision was exactly what my information said it would be. Assuming it's upheld, then the deal is still on."

If so, every second counted.

"What shall we do? Shall we accept the money afterwards and do the fur buying in the meantime?"

"No," was Eve's answer. "I don't want any complications. We should go with the money in hand. You head to the Delink Company and pick up the coin."

Eve strode down the street, unconcerned with puddles, and

continued speaking before Lawrence could say anything. "I'll make ready a boat," she said, stopping suddenly.

The trio came out of the narrow, winding street to find the docks directly in front of them.

Throngs of people walked to and fro, all of them with dark expressions.

Lawrence could tell that the crowds of hurrying merchants were all running to procure furs, and a chill ran down his spine.

It must be even worse in the town square, Lawrence thought, where the fur craftsmen were confronting those tasked with defending the signs that announced the council's decision.

"We're ahead of everyone here. We can't act in haste." Eve turned around. "Let us meet at the inn. We'll finish the deal once everything is in order." Her blue eyes were full of unwavering resolve.

It was in front of these docks while drinking wine with Lawrence that Eve had said that she was saving money for the sake of her childish revenge.

Whether that was a good motivation or not was not for him to decide.

But he did know one thing. Eve was a motivated, capable merchant.

"Understood."

He lightly grasped the hand that was offered to him. Eve smiled thinly, then turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Eve would surely arrange a fine ship and secure a route for the fur.

"Well then, shall we go?" asked Holo.

She sounded neither worried nor rushed.

"Yes, let's," replied Lawrence shortly. He started to walk but stopped short.

One could say that he had been sewn into place by Holo's piercing gaze.

"You saw something—no, you saw it and thought something—so why did you not tell me what it was?" Holo asked.

Lawrence smiled; Holo already knew everything.

"You've realized something dangerous about this deal. Am I wrong?"

He answered immediately; there was no point in hiding it. "You are not."

"So why do you keep silent?"

"Do you want to know?"

Holo reached her hand out to Lawrence's chest, but not simply because he had answered her question with another question.

Lawrence took hold of her finger, lowered it, then let go.

"As far as the danger inherent in this deal goes, let's say I told you of it. It extends to me and to you. But having considered the possibilities, I've decided we should pursue the profit without worrying about the risk. The amount we stand to gain is worth risking my life for, and even should the danger extend to you, you can always avoid it with your own abilities. Of course—"

Holo listened, her expression blank.

"—if it comes to that, it will be hard for us to reunite," Lawrence said.

Holo was silent.

Lawrence continued. "And if we were to have that conversation, this is what you would say—"

"...Do not throw away all that profit just to cling to a single thread of hope," finished Holo.

Lawrence shrugged, smiling.

He'd kept silent about his realization precisely because he hadn't wanted to make Holo say that.

If this deal succeeded, Lawrence's dream would essentially come true. He would return to the town a rich man, and Holo

would come out to greet him and then part ways with him forever with smiles and words of blessing.

Or he would fail, and Holo would have to escape before she was sold off or worse, whereupon she would set off for her homeland alone, determination renewed. If he could be permitted a presumptuous thought, she might come to check on him and make sure he was well, but then she would leave him, and there would be nothing he could say to stop her.

In other words—

"The only chance I have to keep traveling with you is to abandon the deal entirely."

Lawrence held back the other words he felt—that even if it cost him his dream, he couldn't expose Holo to danger.

"Do you think that will make me happy?" Holo asked.

"I do," answered Lawrence without any embarrassment.

His cheek was slapped the next instant. "I won't say I'm happy. I'll never, ever say I'm sorry."

Holo had slapped him with all the strength in her small hand, and it probably hurt her hand more than his face.

The thought occurred to Lawrence as he looked at her trembling expression.

With this, all chances for either of them to tell the other that they wanted to continue the journey were destroyed.

It was what Holo had wished for and what Lawrence had not.

He had given her what she wanted at the expense of his own desires.

This was surely near the very pinnacle of what could be called kindness, and as such, Holo feared it.

It amounted to a quiet revenge for her sudden pronouncement of the journey's end.

"I'll remember you as a cold, calculating merchant," she said.

At those words, Lawrence was finally able to smile. "It would be

bad for my reputation if you thought me a foolish one. Come, let us go retrieve our war funds."

Lawrence started walking with Holo following a short distance behind him.

The sniffling sound he heard was surely not from the cold air.

Perhaps she thought it unfair, but Lawrence was not so magnanimous as to let Holo leave him without exacting some small vengeance.

But vengeance was a hollow thing.

When they arrived at the Delink Company, Holo was her usual self.

Vengeance begat vengeance.

This was for the best.

"There is no God in this world," murmured Holo flatly. "If your omniscient, omnipotent God truly existed, how could he just watch as such suffering goes on?"

Lawrence stopped short of knocking at the door. "How, indeed," he replied with a nod and only then knocked.

The Delink Company was as simply decorated as ever, and within the building it was quiet, as though completely separate from the clamor outside.

Of course, the merchants were aware of what was happening in the town, and upon seeing Lawrence's face, they happily arranged for the money.

Their unpleasant smiles disguised whatever they were thinking, but he could trust their proud assertion that they would guarantee the safety of his companion.

No matter how coldhearted the merchant, you could rely on that coldheartedness when it came to the careful treatment of their goods.

However, when it came time to hand over the money, they put it not in Lawrence's hands, but in Holo's.

It was the wisdom of the moneylender.

In receiving the money from the hands of Holo, the collateral, its import would be more effectively branded into his mind. It was also meant to stop him from defaulting, and in any case, this took his desire to turn a profit with the money to a new level.

Holo looked closely at the coin purse, which fit easily even into her small hands. She then looked at Lawrence.

"When you make a profit, I want the finest wine," Holo said with a sour look.

Enough to be drunk forever.

Enough that this last memory of him would remain in her heart forever.

"Of course," answered Lawrence, taking the coins.

"We, too, shall pray for your good fortune," said the Delink merchant.

He had probably interrupted in order to bring the conversation to a close. Experience would have taught him that such good-byes could drag on.

But Holo and Lawrence had long since said their good-byes.

"When we next meet, I'll be a town merchant," said Lawrence grandly.

Holo smiled. "I can't have a worthless merchant for my companion."

Lawrence didn't know what expression to assume in response to such a statement.

He didn't know, but when he left the shop and looked back, Holo was in the doorway, eyes downcast.

Lawrence ran into town, the bag of sixty gold pieces in hand.

He was in no mood to walk.

He didn't know if this was the right choice.

He just didn't know.

Even though there was no other choice, he still didn't know if this was the right one.

Nothing felt strange about this. Ahead of him lay profit so large he'd never dreamt of it.

Yet his heart was uneasy.

Lawrence held the gold under his arm and ran.

When he arrived at the inn, there were people in the doorway discussing something.

Without even bothering to listen in, he expected they—who were perhaps inn guests and their friends, Lawrence thought—were talking about the uprising in the town.

Lawrence headed for the stables, entering through the storehouse.

There were already two horses and one wagon there. Naturally, one of the horses and the wagon were Lawrence's. It was an excellent wagon with a driver's seat just a bit too big for one person alone.

What made him knit his brows was not the weight of the gold he carried. It was the weight that settled into his chest; it was too heavy. Lawrence shook it off and entered the storehouse.

As always, a variety of goods were piled as high as his head with paths finally cleared between piles of boxes. No single person knew all the things that were stored there. It was the perfect place to hide something small.

The thought occurred to Lawrence as he made his way through the room when he bumped into someone doing just that.

"H-ho there. I got tired of waiting," Eve said, squatting down as she fished through a pile of goods.

"I brought the money." Lawrence produced the small burlap bag, and Eve closed her eyes as if taking a drink for the first time in three days.

"I've arranged for a ship. I found a captain whose profit vanished in the uprising. When I named him a good price, he said he'd set sail even if the navy should send ships to blockade him."

She had a good eye, that was certain.

Now all that remained was to safely move the fur through this uprising.

Then they would take it down the river and triple their money.

This made him dizzy just thinking about it.

Eve took the small pouch she had fished out of the pile of goods and quickly secured it in her breast pocket, then stood. "The lot at the trading company won't shake their heads once they catch sight of our gold coins. Their eyes will be nailed to the money, and they'll nod in spite of themselves."

It was easy to imagine, and Lawrence smiled, though he was not certain how convincing his smile was.

"In that case, let us go! This deal is a jest!"

Eve's talkativeness was a result of her nerves.

The deal was huge. In *trenni* silver, the amount came to two thousand pieces, and even converted to the legendary *lumione* gold coins for convenience's sake, it amounted to sixty of that coin.

The amount of profit that could be extracted from such money made a human life seem unavoidably indistinct.

No, it was indistinct.

Eve seemed to be making for the stable's exit behind Lawrence, but he didn't move. He blocked the way, so she had to stop.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking up, her face uncertain.

"When we buy fur with this money, the profit will come to four thousand silver pieces in the end, correct?"

Eve was about a head shorter than Lawrence. She retreated one step, then two, her cowl hiding her expression completely. "That's right," she said.

"And you've arranged for a ship, so now all we need to do is buy the fur."

"That's right."

"And you have a good sense for where to sell that fur."

"That's right."

In exchange for borrowing the money from Lawrence, Eve was lending him her experience and wits.

She had it all thought out, drawing a map of exactly how she would thread her way through the complicated relationships of the town, cinching up a deal and turning a profit.

Eve appeared before him, utterly confident that no matter what sudden wind might blow, she would not so much as flinch.

A traveling merchant who crossed the wilderness—that was the image of Eve he'd first embraced, her voice made hoarse by the dry wind.

Though from time to time Lawrence caught glimpses of her weaker self beneath the thick cowl she wore, she had the nerve to be able to keep him fooled.

She was a sly enough merchant for that.

If he just stayed quiet, pretending not to notice anything, playing the fool while leaving the deal in her hands, there would be no trouble.

If Eve was going to deceive him, it would not be to steal his share away.

The flat, hard truth was that she was wise enough to make this deal go smoothly.

She was no fool. He knew she wasn't so reckless as to throw in for a deal with no chance of success.

So he should just stay quiet.

If the deal succeeded, Lawrence would become a town merchant at the very least.

If only he could stay quiet.

"Do you doubt me?" Eve demanded.

"No."

"Then what? Have you lost your nerve?"

Lawrence looked within himself.

Was he weak? Timid?

No.

There was only one reason he couldn't stay foolish and silent. He couldn't get Holo out of his head.

"If we don't hurry, the merchants beyond the walls are going to get their money situations sorted. They've been making arrangements. We don't know where they might raise it from. Do you just want to bite down on your knuckle and look on as others turn an absurd profit? Are you listen—"

"Are you not frightened?" Lawrence asked, cutting her off.

Eve looked stunned. "Me? Hah. Don't be absurd," she spat, her lip twisting. "Of course I am."

Her voice was low, but it still echoed through the storehouse.

"It's thousands of silver pieces we're talking about here. How could I not be frightened? A human life is a fragile thing in the face of that much money. I don't have the nerve to stay calm in that sort of scenario."

"There's no guarantee I won't change my mind and attack you," said Lawrence.

"Hah. Indeed. The reverse is also true. No, our suspicion of each other may only grow…but in either case"—Eve took a deep breath as if to calm herself—"we can't continue taking these risks."

Eve did indeed understand the danger of this deal.

No, it was precisely because she understood that she was deceiving Lawrence.

So what was it that she saw on the other side of this profit for which she was willing to go to such lengths?

Eve laughed in a dry voice. "I can tell by your face you want to ask me something stupid. You want to know why I'll go to such lengths to earn money, no?" she said, seeming to wipe the palm of her right hand on her hip.

That was how natural the motion was.

"Sorry, but I can't have you back out of the deal now."

Suddenly a thick-bladed cleaver was in her hand. It would have been rude to call it a knife.

"To be honest, I didn't want to use this. But consider the amount. I'll be in trouble if you pull out now. You understand, don't you?"

Once they have a weapon in their hands, most people become excited as the blood rushes to their heads, but Eve's voice was calm and dry to the end.

"So long as the deal goes well, your profit's guaranteed. So hand it over."

"A human life isn't worth much in the face of sixty gold pieces."

"That's right... and you don't want to find that out in person, do you?"

Lawrence flashed his merchant's grin and produced the burlap pouch that Holo had given him, offering it to Eve.

"God's blessings be upon those with wit and wisdom," murmured Eve, and she made as if to take the pouch. But then—

"..."

"—!"

Each of them moved with wordless energy.

Lawrence retreated, and Eve's blade swung down.

An instant later, there was a jingling sound as the bag of gold coins hit the floor.

The instant passed.

Eve's eyes blazed with blue flame, and Lawrence looked back at her evenly, unsurprised.

A few seconds later, their mutual failures occurred to each of them.

"We've both of us fallen short. Am I wrong?"

As she didn't pull back her arm and retreat, Lawrence caught a clear glimpse of the blade.

Eve was clever to the end.

The blade had been reversed, striking with the dull side of the single-edged weapon. He could tell that Eve didn't have any intention of cutting him.

In contrast, Lawrence's dodge had been in earnest, and yet the fact that he hadn't been surprised meant that he was convinced that her blade would fall.

Had he truly trusted Eve, Lawrence would have believed the opposite, standing still or betraying surprise when forced to dodge.

He didn't trust her, and he hadn't been surprised because he knew she was hiding something.

"My failure was in being sniffed out by you. That's what you meant by asking if I was scared, is it not?" asked Eve.

Eve didn't as much as glance at the bag of coins on the floor.

This was proof that she was used to violence.

If he thought about the fact that his opponent was a woman, he would be dead in an instant.

"The statue in Rigolo's house is one piece of evidence, isn't it?" asked Lawrence.

Eve's lip twisted, and she switched the knife from its reversed position to a proper grip.

"You pretended to be dealing in stone statues, but what you were really doing was smuggling processed rock salt molded into statues."

"Could be...," she said, and Lawrence could see Eve lowering her stance.

Whether or not he ran, this was looking like a bad bet.

"I had reason to suspect you of smuggling salt, but it never occurred to me that it would be carved rock salt, since the Church would surely notice you carrying out smuggling on that scale."

But there was still a way around the problem.

It went without saying that it meant cutting the Church in on the deal.

Lenos's parish had been desperate for money.

The Church wouldn't hesitate to dabble in salt smuggling, which surely brought in more money than stone statues.

Lawrence had not realized this sooner due to the fact that Eve brought her statues in from a port town.

If the material was being hauled in from a seaside town, from the standpoint of weight and volume, any salt would obviously have been grain salt.

Hauling bulkier, more labor-intensive rock salt in from the coast flew against any merchant's common sense.

And it was that common sense that Eve had manipulated in order to get through the town gates.

"I'm sure you and the Church had a lovely honeymoon for a while. I've heard that it was throwing so much money around that nobody could figure out where it was coming from. But then it all ended, I'm guessing because of the northern campaign. The Church started to solidify its base of power and pulled out of the salt-smuggling racket rather than risk an uprising or two. And just then, this fur trouble came up. And being clever, this is what you proposed to the bishop—"

Eve raised the tip of her blade high.

Lawrence backed up another step.

"If the merchants waiting outside the town were going to buy up all the fur, why not just do it ourselves?"

Eve had said that she had heard the results of the Council of Fifty's meeting from her contacts inside the Church.

Still, her skill had been far out of the ordinary.

Rather than imagining Eve had come up with all of this on the spot, it made more sense for Lawrence to believe that she had plotted it all along, and only just then took action.

And it went without saying who stood to profit the most from a rule that restricted fur sales to cash.

It would be extremely lucrative for the Church, in whose coffers sat a nearly unimaginable amount of money from the tithes it collected.

The bigger a trading firm became, the more of its business took place on paper, in entries on ledgers, with all of the money going into and out of the firm assiduously recorded, making raising money behind closed doors difficult.

And with the careful body searches being conducted at the town gates, and in the case of merchants coming to buy fur, the questioning of the origin of their money, a significant number of merchants could be contained.

But Eve still maintained confidence that she could buy up fur.

It was true that the foreign merchants had made long preparations, but now that the craftsmen and suppliers had rioted, none of them would risk giving foreigners any money at all.

And yet Eve was nervous.

That could mean only one thing.

She knew where the foreign merchants were going to get their money, and she knew there was nothing she could do to stop it.

That was the true motive of the Church in deciding to cut ties with the fallen noble merchant who, in addition to smuggling salt, had approached the archbishop of the region by the sea.

Eve said that the Church had claimed it was more advantageous to deal with a trade company than with an individual merchant.

And that was exactly so.

If the Church was going to partner with a trading company in an effort to buy up fur, then the action implied they had gained a powerful patron, thus allowing them to abandon her.

Eve must have thought that none of the outside merchants could possibly be carrying a large amount of money, but what if the Church carefully moved its tithe money outside the town?

The revolting craftsmen and merchants would discover that contrary to their belief, the foreign merchants had a large amount of money, probably because some entity within the town had betrayed them.

There hadn't been a single lie in the story that Eve had presented Lawrence.

There had not been a lie... but it wasn't the truth, either.

"The statue in Rigolo's house is certainly rock salt. And you're right that I was the one who brought the furs to the attention of that lousy bishop and right about him cutting me loose and finding another patron, as well. I'll leave it up to you as to whether to believe me or not," said Eve with a laugh, tossing the knife to the floor.

"Trust me," she seemed to be saying.

Lawrence didn't even wonder whether or not there was a need for her to lie this far in.

He would simply decide whether she was lying or not and act accordingly.

That was all.

"And the reason you think I brought the deal to you... that's probably right, too."

"I'm a shield to protect you."

Eve shrugged. "I'm a salt smuggler who knows all the Church's worst secrets. Of course, before we parted ways, they guaranteed my life. It was a verbal contract, so you never know. If a good opportunity were to arise, though, I'm sure they'll use me again. So it must be true. And I did make a profit myself. I didn't have any intention of starting an uprising, and I'm sure they know that."

"But you couldn't let the deal that you proposed to them get away."

"Exactly. Even if it means I'll be interfering with their expectations, I can't let this profit go."

"So you thought to yourself, 'They can kill one person, but it's hard to kill two.'"

What would the Church think of Lawrence, a man who used his own companion as collateral in a deal that went against the interests of the town?

From the outside, he surely looked like a conspirator who knew all the ins and outs of Eve's plan.

One person can be easily silenced, but as soon as there are two, things become difficult—all the more so when the second person is an outsider on whom they have no background information. Without knowing where Lawrence came from, there was no telling what trade firm or guild might come storming into the city if he was killed.

Lawrence had unknowingly played that role.

And because he hadn't known anything about it, his performance had been magnificent.

He must have either seemed simply reckless or looked like he believed the Church unworthy of fear.

If he hadn't known anything, if he had pretended not to know anything, the deal would surely have gone off well.

"So what's it going to be?" Eve asked.

"It's going to be this," said Lawrence, and in that instant, he lunged for both the bag of gold and the blade.

"..."

"..."

The two glared wordlessly at each other.

A cold sweat broke out on Lawrence's forehead.

The moment he reached out for the blade, a small knife had appeared in Eve's hand, and she plunged it down at him.

And this time she was not striking with the flat of the blade.

That much Lawrence could predict, but getting out of the way would be a gamble.

"Do you crave money so much?" he asked.

By some miracle, he was able to twist Eve's left hand away by the wrist.

While she was far from powerless, she was still a woman. The knife fell from her hand.

"D-don't you...?"

"I do—no..." Lawrence paused before continuing. "I did."

"That's a funny—"

"Joke," perhaps she would have said, but Lawrence twisted her arm around and shoved her against a stack of wooden crates, grabbing her collar with his free hand and yanking it back, cutting off her voice.

"If you kill me and hide my corpse, it probably won't be found until long after the deal's done. The Church would never guess that our partnership had fractured. I have to say, I'm impressed. Or were you simply planning to take the gold and run?"

Eve stood on tiptoes, her face contorted.

The oily sweat on her brow was proof that this was no act.

"No, you wouldn't do that. The reason you tried to kill me is the bag you were looking for when I first entered the storeroom. You're just dying to use it."

That instant, Eve paled.

She realized that if he continued to choke her, her life could genuinely be in danger, and this showed on her face.

Money was more important to her than her life.

Lawrence laughed.

"So, it's the money you made smuggling salt? What you managed to pile up over time must be at least equal to what I brought—maybe more. And you were going to buy fur with all that, with me none the wiser."

Eve did not answer.

The tortured expression on her face seemed to come more from

her fear that the money in her breast pocket would be taken than the fact that her plan had been revealed.

"The reason you couldn't do the fur deal yourself is because you have too much money on hand. If you tried that alone, the Church would think nothing of killing you. So you brought me in. It's easy to kill one person, but killing two—that's hard. And you'll continue to pull together money to invest until the Church gets serious about eliminating us. It's one thing not to care about a stranger's life, but you don't even care about your own. All you care about is profit!"

If it hadn't been for that fact, Lawrence probably would have stayed quiet.

He probably would have pretended to be ignorant of the salt smuggling and simply focused on the deal.

But he couldn't watch someone take such massive risks and simply let that go.

No matter how great the profit, there had to be a limit to the amount of risk one allowed.

What Eve was doing was tantamount to suicide.

Having come this far, he wanted—needed—to ask her why.

"What is it…?"

"…?"

"What is it at the end of all of this that makes taking such absurd risks worthwhile?"

Even as Lawrence hoisted her off the ground, even as her face turned dark red, even then, Eve smiled.

"I'm a merchant, too. Making money brings me happiness. But I don't know what lies at the end of it all. First you make one silver piece, then two. Then after two, three. But have you never stopped to consider what awaits at the end of this drive to quench that constant thirst?"

Of course, Lawrence hadn't considered this, either.

He didn't have the luxury.

That was because since meeting Holo, he suddenly felt freer. His constant quest for profit had somehow diminished.

Its place had been supplanted by conversations with Holo.

Eve was probably his exact opposite.

She put profit above her own life.

"Wh-what...what do...," she began, her voice hoarser than usual.

Lawrence slackened his grip somewhat, and Eve wheezed as though asthmatic, coughing. Her smile never wavered as she continued.

"What do I...think is waiting?"

Her blue eyes stared straight into his. "Are you so childish as to think something is waiting?" she sneered.

He didn't tighten his grip again. She had hit her mark perfectly.

"Every time I looked at the rich bastard that bought me, I wondered to myself—what could he possibly be doing with so much money? No matter how much you make, there's no end to it, but the next day comes, and you can't keep yourself from earning more. How awful to be rich, I thought."

Eve coughed, took a deep breath, and continued. "And I must look like a pathetic creature to you. After all, I chose the same path he did."

The next moment, Lawrence felt like he saw Eve's hand move.

And then without really understanding what had happened, by the time he realized he'd been punched, he collapsed to the floor.

"I watched his vain efforts, even watched him die, and yet still I chose this path. Do you know why?"

It wasn't the small knife that was now perched beneath Lawrence's throat.

It was the large cleaver clutched in her hand, waiting vigilantly for a chance to do its job.

"——, that's why," said Eve, striking Lawrence's face a terrible blow with the blade's handle. His vision exploded in red light, then half his face blossomed into hot pain.

He realized his body felt much lighter, but he couldn't get up.

Neither could he close his mouth, and with what felt more like unbearable disorienting pressure all over his body, he couldn't even raise his voice. Yet somehow, using his elbow, Lawrence managed to roll over and get into a crawling position. He couldn't move any more than that, and he looked at the drops of blood that pattered to the floor through his tear-blurred eyes.

His ears could still sort out the sounds around him, so he knew that Eve had left the storehouse.

She had probably taken the money.

That thought filtered like pleasantly cool water through his swimming head.

He didn't know how long he was in there before some random guest of the inn entered and rushed to his side, helping him sit up.

He was a large, round man with clothes fringed in fur from all over. It had to be the old fur trader from the north Arold had mentioned.

"Are—are you all right?"

Lawrence laughed at the clichéd phrase in spite of himself, then managed a "sorry," and nodded.

"Was it a robber?"

Finding a person collapsed in a storehouse naturally suggested as much.

But Lawrence shook his head in the negative.

"A broken deal, then?"

There were only so many types of misfortune that could befall a merchant.

"Oh, what's this…," said the man, and when Lawrence saw

what he had picked up, he forgot all about his painful face and laughed.

"What's wrong?"

Evidently the fat man couldn't read because he only cocked his head curiously at the paper, and when Lawrence reached for it, he handed it over, puzzlement written all over his face.

Lawrence looked down at the paper once again.

He really wasn't misunderstanding.

Apparently Eve couldn't quite bring herself to toss Lawrence entirely aside.

"Obsession maybe?" Lawrence murmured to himself, swallowing blood.

But that didn't seem quite right.

Immediately after she had struck Lawrence with the haft of her cleaver, he'd caught the merest glimpse of Eve's face.

It was neither obsessed nor avaricious.

"Hey, are you all right?" The man hastily tried to help Lawrence up when he started to stand, but Lawrence merely nodded and declined.

Eve had left him Arold's deed to the inn.

As a fellow merchant, he could hardly fail to understand what she meant by this.

Having gotten to his feet, Lawrence began to walk, albeit unsteadily.

He tottered out of the storehouse and into the stable.

"She needs to see, does she?"

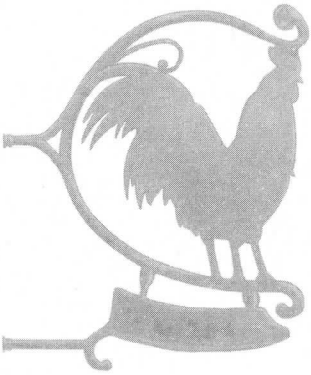
Eve had taken all his money.

There was only one place for Lawrence to go.

"She needs to see."

He laughed again, then spat blood.

EPILOGUE



There were so many people in the streets that it was impossible to pass near the town square to get to the docks, owing to the fight between those trying to make the council's decision public and those who opposed that decision.

Angry shouts and bellows were exchanged, and tensions were high.

Not a one of them noticed Lawrence's terrible state. That was how bad the riot was.

As long as the sun or moon was out, he could navigate a complicated city with nothing but the date and the direction. He ran through the streets, heading for the Delink Company.

Eve had probably gone directly to buy fur.

It didn't seem like Lawrence was going to make staggering amounts of money, but he felt he didn't mind.

Leaving behind the letter that proved Arold was surrendering the inn was probably Eve's last concession, but for Lawrence it was enough.

The letter of guarantee he held was probably worth just shy of the amount he had borrowed from the Delink Company. At the very least, the merchants wanted to curry favor with

Eve, who was nobility, a goal they would be able to accomplish. Whether or not they would be able to quickly collect the money from Lawrence was a secondary concern, and they would probably be willing to wait a bit on however much he came up short.

The problem was Holo.

What sort of face would she make once she found out Lawrence had let the deal that would have given him his dream slip away?

She would be enraged surely.

"Well, well!" It wasn't just Eringin. Each of the members of the Delink Company considered him, their expressions neutral. Lawrence expected nothing less.

When he asked where Holo was being kept, they led him to a single room within the building.

However, once he put his hand on the door, they stopped him with their eyes.

"Don't lay a hand on the collateral," they seemed to say.

Lawrence produced the deed that Eve had given him and handed it over to the Delink Company. They did the profit-loss computation so fast it put a traveling merchant to shame.

Eringin smoothly put the deed into his breast pocket and smiled—genuinely for once—before withdrawing.

Lawrence put his hand to the door and opened it.

"I said no one may enter—!" cried Holo, then cut herself off.

He had hoped she might cry, but evidently he didn't give Holo enough credit.

Nonetheless, she was clearly shocked, her face a mask of anger.

"Why, you...you..." Her trembling lips seemed to make it difficult to articulate words.

Lawrence nonchalantly closed the door behind him and sat on the chair in the middle of the room.

"You fool!"

Holo flew at him. Surely those words were made to describe exactly what happened this moment.

He had expected it and so managed to avoid being thrown from the chair.

"Don't—don't tell me—don't tell me you called off the deal!"

"I certainly didn't. It was stolen right out from under me."

Holo's surprise was like that of a maiden whose favorite dress has been stained, and she grabbed Lawrence by his lapels using all of her strength.

"Was that not your dream?!"

"It was my dream. No. It still is."

"Then why—why?"

"Why am I so calm, you mean?"

Holo looked on the verge of tears, her lips trembling violently.

Lawrence had been certain that regardless of the outcome of the deal, he would be separating from Holo in this town.

Holo felt the same way.

"We merchants worked a few things out, so I was left enough to buy you back from this company."

At a loss for words... Lawrence wanted to label and frame Holo's face as it was just then.

"Do—do you not remember why I was so frightened?"

"It's too embarrassing. I can't bring myself to speak of it."

Holo struck him in the face, right where Eve had hit him with the haft of the cleaver, and the pain was enough to make him collapse.

Holo then mercilessly hauled him back up.

"And then you came traipsing back, even knowing that, to appear before me, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu? What do you wish for? What do you desire? Tell me! Just tell me, damn you!"

Lawrence remembered when he had seen her like this before.

Back then, too, Lawrence had been beaten, had lost all his assets, and faced death.

Holo had pitched in to help bail him out that time.

What about now?

He had been robbed, injured, yet had managed to get away while somehow safeguarding Holo's life... Would she not see it that way?

If not, the words Holo expected were obvious.

She wanted to part ways from him here in this town, smiling all the way.

"Your... wolf form."

Holo nodded, baring her fangs. "Leave it to me. You'll become a full-fledged merchant thanks to meeting me. We can end the story with a smile. It must be so!" she said, producing the pouch that held the wheat grains about her neck.

Lawrence watched her, smiling.

"What's the m—"

She never got to finish the word.

"Did you think I was going to ask you to use your wolf form to get the money back?"

Lawrence pulled Holo's body into his embrace. Immediately the sound of something scattering could be heard, no doubt the wheat grains upon the floor.

Perhaps among them were some tears, but he dismissed that as wishful thinking.

"Eve is pursuing a deal tantamount to suicide. If the Church learns of it, our lives will be in danger, too. We should leave this town before the disturbance is over."

"—!"

Holo tried to twist away, but Lawrence stopped her and continued speaking as coolly as he could manage.

"I didn't see Eve's true nature. She is obsessed with money. She thinks nothing of throwing her life away for it. But no number of lives will satisfy a deal like that."

"What deal are you going to go along with, then?" asked Holo. She again attempted to escape from Lawrence's embrace but eventually surrendered.

"When crossing a dangerous bridge, once is enough."

"..."

Back when Lawrence had visited the village of Pasloe, there had been no particular reason for Holo, hiding in his wagon bed, to travel with him. She could have stolen his clothes and taken the wheat, and she would have been just fine on her own.

If she had truly believed that becoming close to another led only and always to despair, if she genuinely feared that, no matter how much she longed for company, she would never have spoken to him.

A dog that burns itself on the fireplace will always be wary.

Those who approach the fireplace are the ones who think that within it smolder roasted chestnuts and are unable to forget that sweet taste.

Even if he could see what hardships lay ahead or even if at the end there would be nothing at all, Lawrence had to reach out. He had to.

He needed to see.

He needed to see what was at the end of all of this.

When Eve had struck Lawrence, he had laughed from the humiliation of it. He'd laughed like a girl.

Lawrence was a bit too young to turn into an enlightened recluse.

He put his hand around the back of Holo's head, and she flinched.

Becoming closer than they already were couldn't possibly be the right decision. Holo's view of the matter was the right one, he supposed.

The end would surely come, and so staying like this was not the wisest course.

And yet Lawrence embraced Holo. And then—

"I like you."

He kissed her right cheek ever so lightly.

Holo froze, then looked Lawrence straight in the eyes, so close that their foreheads nearly touched. Her expression shifted slowly to rage.

"What do you even know about me?"

"I don't know much. I don't know if the decision your centuries of life has led you to is correct. But I do know one thing."

He felt as if he might melt into her red-brown pupils.

There was no doubt that he would die before her, and the fact of his aging meant that his values would be quicker to change.

Surely Lawrence would be the one for whom delight would fade first.

And yet, he didn't let her go.

"Wishing for you to be mine might not make it so. But if I don't wish it, you'll never be mine."

Holo looked down, then wrenched herself away violently, finally succeeding in pulling herself free.

Her tail bristled and her ears pricked up with her overwhelming anger.

But she did not change to her wolf form. She remained human, glaring at him.

"Eve chases profit, even though it puts her life in danger. Even though the moment she gets what she wants, it fades. There's a lesson to be learned there as a merchant. Call it a mirror. I thought I should try to be more like that," finished Lawrence without any embarrassment, clearing his throat once.

He then stooped to gather up the wheat grains that had been spilled beneath the chair.

Holo stood there stock-still.

She stood there without looking at anything in particular.

When droplets began to hit the floor where Lawrence gathered up the wheat, he looked up.

"You fool…," said Holo, wiping her tears with one hand. They welled up one after another, but she wiped them anyway.

Lawrence offered the now-refilled wheat pouch up toward Holo's free hand, whereupon she grabbed it.

"You'll take proper responsibility, won't you?" Her smile was not deliberate.

"When the times comes, we'll part ways with smiles and leave it at that. There's no such thing as a journey that doesn't end. But—"

Tears continued to fall, but by now it seemed Holo was crying more at her own pathetic visage than anything else.

Even a human girl rarely looked so unsightly.

Lawrence smiled. "But as it is, I don't think we could part with smiles right now. That's all."

Holo nodded at Lawrence's words as she wiped her tears.

"Anyway, why are you so pessimistic?" he asked.

There had to be a reason.

There was no question that the many years she had weathered contained within them reasons enough for her timidity.

Nonetheless, Holo dried her tears, grasped the wheat pouch, and curled her index finger around Lawrence's. Despite the many changes of heart and happiness, the many hardships, she had yet enough hope to crawl into his wagon bed that day.

The conclusion that in order to achieve happiness one must wish for nothing was inadmissible.

Even Holo, having lived so many centuries, could not have forgotten the innocence of her youth.

Eventually she looked up at the ceiling, sniffing loudly.

A moment passed.

"You wish to know why I am pessimistic?" she asked, looking back at Lawrence. "Don't you prefer me tearful and sobbing?"

Lawrence could only laugh at the unexpected attack.

He did not stand but sat there as he took Holo's hand in his own and kissed it, as a knight kisses a maiden's hand.

She was Holo the Wisewolf. When she spoke next, it was in a tone that befit the situation, as though she was handing down a pronouncement from on high.

"You've rejected my notion, so you had best be prepared to take responsibility for what may come."

"...I will," answered Lawrence.

Holo was silent for a moment, then sighed.

"You took my foolishness seriously—seriously enough to lose all your profit. So I—"

She stopped herself, shook her head, then continued.

"I'll go along with your foolish plan. However!"

"However?"

No sooner had Lawrence spoken than Holo kicked him hard on his shoulder, then looked down on him as a person looks down on an insect.

"I can't have a worthless merchant for my companion. Don't tell me you'll let your deal be stolen, then turn tail and run."

Given that this was what passed for kindness from Holo, Lawrence had but one thing to say.

He took her hand and got to his feet, then wiped what remained of the tears from her face. "Your kindness is quite frightening as well."

Lawrence could not be sure whether or not she would call him a fool for this.

As to why, surely Holo would not be spoken of in the tales that were passed down through eternity.

There were only a handful of things that would stop her from speaking her mind.

"...So, how will you get the money back?" Holo's eyes were cool and piercing, as if to say that he had no choice.



And yet Lawrence felt like making a joke.

Those eyes of hers hid her embarrassment, after all.

"Forget the profit. I'd rather have you give me back my initiative."

"Fool," declared Holo flatly, slapping his swollen cheek and pulling away. "Do you think I would ever allow such a thing?"

Lawrence wanted to double over in pain, but her tone suggested she was totally unconcerned with that.

She spun around as if to show him the magnificent tail of Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, then put a hand on her hip and looked at him over her shoulder. "I'd be in trouble if I fell for you."

Lawrence would never forget her mischievous smile.

Holo giggled, causing her chestnut fall of hair to shake.

It was a foolish conversation.

It really is, he thought.

"I suppose you would be," he said.

"Mm."

Lawrence and Holo left the room.

They held hands, and though neither of them had initiated it, their fingers were intertwined.

Isuna Hasekura

Born December 27, 1982, winner of the twelfth Dengeki Novel Prize Silver Medal. Despite studying physics in college, when deadlines approach he subscribes to the psychological theory of "I can do it if I just work hard," then agonizes about whether, as a man of science, he should instead be thinking, "This is physically impossible."

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