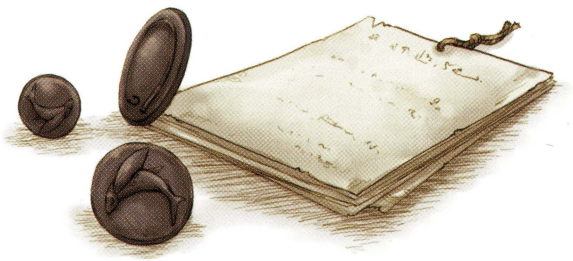

ISUNA HASEKURA
SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 6

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 6

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




The boy got to his feet and dashed straight across the dock, heedless of the guard's orders.
He was heading, of course, in the same direction that his voice was directed. To Lawrence.
"Master! It's me! It's me!"
Tote Col, a wandering lad


"Honestly...," said Holo, looking around briefly before coming down to him. Her arms wrapped around his neck as she sat lightly upon him...
"If our positions were reversed, you would surely have been just as angry. Am I wrong?"


"Ha-ha-ha! She has a catlike quickness about her—it quite suits her, don't you think?"
—Ibn Ragusa, the ship's master

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VOLUME VI

ISUNA HASEKURA

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ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation: Paul Starr

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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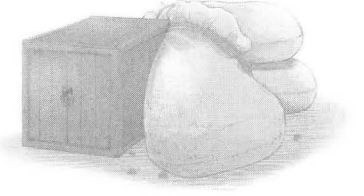
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SPICE & WOLF

PROLOGUE



Holo's strides were long and quick.

She walked as though she meant to punch holes in the cobblestones with her heels, and although Lawrence usually found himself slowing his walking pace to let her keep up, suddenly the tables were turned.

The town was still chaotic; the clamor of the waves of humanity was violent as they crossed the harbor. Lawrence found himself pulled toward the water's edge by Holo, as she took his hand and led the way.

From outside, it might well have looked as though a kindhearted nun was pulling along a haggard traveling merchant in an effort to protect him.

But in reality, there was nothing kindhearted about her.

After all, just a short time ago, she had struck a forceful blow to the already-swelled-up right side of his head.

"Come, can you not walk a bit faster?!"

Holo showed not a shred of kindness now, pulling hard on his hand and scolding him roundly if he slowed even a little, her expression sharp, as though she had been about to eat some honey-drizzled raspberry tarts but had dropped them on the floor.

But Lawrence said nothing.

That her expression did not seem to accuse him made her actions difficult to criticize.

Lawrence was well aware of the fact that she was angry at herself.

That said, here in the town of Lenos, he had worked up a scheme to sell furs with Eve that had put his life on the line and even wound up injuring him, only to then have a dizzyingly difficult exchange with Holo.

A bit of a rest would have been nice.

"Can we walk a bit slower? Just for a little while."

It wasn't as though Lawrence had lost a significant amount of blood, but the earlier scuffle involving knives and cleavers had left him more than usually tired. His feet were leaden, and his arms felt like those of a wood-carved mannequin.

And in any case, hurrying was pointless.

Lawrence tried to convince Holo of as much, but she looked back at him with a glare as hot as boiling oil.

"Walk? Walk, you say? So did you walk when you came to meet me then?"

The town of Lenos was on the edge of chaos; no one turned to look at Holo when she shouted.

"N-no! I ran. I ran!"

Holo looked ahead again without bothering to voice her reply—*then a bit more running will hardly kill you*—and continued to walk with large strides. Because she was still gripping his hand so tightly, he had no choice but to keep up.

He was just as he had been when going to the Delink Company, pressuring them into giving up Holo, then convincing Holo not to go through with her plan of ending their journey right then and there, instead resuming their business together.

Holo's slender fingers intertwined tightly with his. She was not so much holding his hand as their hands were joined.

And so Lawrence had no choice but to be pulled along. If Holo moved forward, so did he. If he stopped, his fingers would be yanked painfully, and the only solution was to catch up with her.

The forced march brought them shortly to Arold's inn.

"Out of my way!" cried Holo to the crowd of merchants that had gathered there to exchange information on the upheaval in the town.

Despite being well used to being yelled at, the merchants gave way to Holo's threatening stance.

Their eyes followed her in, peering closely at Lawrence as he trailed behind her.

Lawrence felt a bit oppressed, already anticipating the things that would be said about him when next he returned to this town to do business.

"Where is the old man?" Holo demanded.

Upon entering the inn, instead of finding Arold in his usual place, there were two men who looked like traveling craftsmen sitting in front of the charcoal brazier and drinking mulled wine.

"Th-the old man?"

"The old man with the beard! The master of this shop. Where is he?"

Going by their outwardly apparent ages, the two craftsmen would have been three times Holo's age, but they were so cowed by her threatening attitude that they looked to each other hastily before one spoke. "Er, he just asked us to look after the place while he was gone, but we don't know where..."

"Rrrrrr," growled Holo; it was enough to make even Lawrence flinch, to say nothing of the two craftsmen.

Her sharp canines might well have been visible, and little was as intimidating as an angry woman baring her fangs.

That would have been Lawrence's answer, he guessed, had anybody said anything to him.

"He must have gone off with that fox... Perhaps they think to make fools of us. Come, you! Let us go!" shouted Holo, pulling again on Lawrence's hand and leading him farther into the inn and up the stairs.

The two craftsmen watched them go.

No doubt they had looked back at each other once Holo and Lawrence disappeared up the stairs. The scene seemed amusingly plausible in Lawrence's mind.

For Arold, the master of this inn, to do something like leaving these two craftsmen to watch over his place while he was out, Lawrence could think of only one possibility: It had to be because of Eve, whose plan for fur trading was so dangerous that not even Lawrence could be party to it. Arold must have headed downriver with her. While Eve's goal was the port town of Kerube, Arold was probably taking his pilgrimage south.

Arold had never talked about himself very much, so Lawrence didn't know exactly what it was that could spur him to such action. Eve seemed quite familiar with him, so perhaps there was something in their shared past that led them to a mutual understanding.

In the same way that one had nostalgia for one's hometown, no place was so comforting as a house one had become used to living in.

The inn was darkened with age, and the sediment of passing time had accumulated within its walls, which had once contained the leather strap tannery where Arold had worked as master.

It would take something significant indeed to make him abandon all that and head south on pilgrimage.

Would he count on Eve to handle traveling expenses and to act as a guide for the difficult journey?

Just as Holo had lived for many years and experienced much, Arold's life had not been a short one.

What someone valued, and how he or she conducted his or her judgments, varied from person to person.

Weighing that value on the balance of the world and testing which way the scales tipped was life itself—and so Lawrence had gone to see Holo at the Delink Company.

Having let Holo pull him bodily into and out of the room, he now pulled back. Holo turned to face him.

"There's something I'd like to ask you," he said.

Holo had not been expecting Lawrence to pull away, and as she looked at him, her expression was so simple it was funny—her earlier fierceness had peeled away, revealing her true feelings.

She seemed both upset and strangely resolute.

In a word, she was lost.

As to what it was that had her so confused, Lawrence could hazard a guess.

"What do you plan to do next?" he asked.

But that was that. As soon as Lawrence voiced his question, Holo, who was also called the wisewolf, regained her composure.

"What shall I do, you ask?"

Her tone was such that Lawrence would have been hardly surprised to hear her follow up by saying, *I'll rip your throat out for asking, that's what I'll do.*

Yet Lawrence didn't flinch, instead bringing up his hand—which still held Holo's—and brushing a red speck from the corner of her mouth with his knuckle.

No doubt it was a fleck of dried blood from Lawrence's own face.

Her expression seemed angry, but even at a glance, it was clear that her mask was slipping.

She was angry at herself.

Her own feelings were too much for her to handle.

"Even if we're leaving the town," said Lawrence, "we'll need a travel plan."

"A-a travel plan, you say?!" Her expression was complicated; it seemed Holo was less and less certain of exactly why she was yelling at Lawrence.

"It wouldn't be good to charge out of town on some vague notion."

"Some...vague notion? Do you not wish to recover our profit from that vixen?" Holo's face was suddenly very close to Lawrence's as she confronted him, but because of the height difference, she was unavoidably looking up.

It would be easy to think she was drawing near him for an embrace, but Lawrence was sure that if he suggested as much, he'd be hurled from the window.

"The vixen—ah, you mean Eve. And the profit—"

"We must get it back! She swindled you and made off with the coin! We must get our due!"

"As in the gold before?" said Lawrence, at which Holo nodded.

After nodding, she looked down, no doubt because her mask of anger was slipping and needed to be replaced.

Previously Lawrence had been completely and utterly betrayed.

But this time things were not so clear.

True, Eve had lured Lawrence into a trap, but part of the blame for that lay with Lawrence for not realizing it sooner.

Moreover, that Holo stood right there in front of him meant that his deal with Eve was fully resolved.

In reality, Lawrence had backed out of Eve's suicidally dangerous plan.

She was going up against the town's church, and Lawrence highly doubted that the church would choose to overlook the offense—though at the moment, Lenos's church surely had its hands full, trying to gain control over a more violent uprising than it could ever have expected.

And Eve would not be the only one taking furs downriver for

her own profit. The briefest glance at the port made that much obvious.

Things had not gone as the church had planned, and it could not easily do as it pleased with Eve. The church was no doubt thinking to leave her be, instead dealing with the affair in Lenos.

Thus it was hard to imagine that it would try to capture her or her accomplice in fur trading—that is to say, Lawrence.

All this meant that Eve's gamble had paid off. She had won.

Lawrence now wondered if he had the right to claim a share of the profit.

He'd pulled out his support and reclaimed Holo. It didn't make any sense for him to then go and demand a cut of the gain.

The ever-wise Holo must have also long since realized this—yet she still spoke of reclaiming their share.

Moreover, Holo was angry at herself—angry at her own selfishness.

Whence came that selfishness? Lawrence asked himself.

The answer was obvious, and it made Lawrence very happy.

"I-I mean, are you not frustrated? She's gotten away from us!" Holo said quickly to change the subject, knowing full well that if pressed, she would be at a loss for words.

Lawrence turned his head askance and nodded.

He tried his best to make it look as though he was giving in to Holo's insistence.

"That is true, yes. But in terms of practical problems that face us, there is a significant one."

"...What do you mean?"

He couldn't voice his true thoughts, but drawing a veil of lies over the exchange wouldn't help either of them trust each other, either.

Both of them were stubborn, so this would have to do: "Eve surely constructed her plan with care. Mere happenstance would

never have let her find a ship so quickly. She must have made arrangements in advance. Given that, I highly doubt we can immediately set off after her. Even if we wanted to follow her on horseback, the stables will be as chaotic as the rest of the town is."

"What of your horse, then?"

"Him? He's strong, to be sure, but there's no telling how well he'd do if we made him run over a long distance. Horses bred for speed are nothing like draft horses," said Lawrence. Holo looked down, evidently deep in thought.

Lawrence, of course, did not point out the obvious—which was that just as Holo had suggested back at the Delink Company, if she assumed her wolf form, they could travel faster than anything else.

"What's more, Eve spoke as though she had already arranged a buyer downriver in Kerube. Eve was discussing plans with the assumption that the church would give chase, so she no doubt already has an escape plan prepared."

None of this was exaggeration.

Plausible escape paths could be divided into transoceanic routes and overland routes. If she fled by sea rather than land, there would be no way to catch her.

Depending on the destination and given favorable weather, sea travel could be as much as five times faster than land.

It would be difficult to catch her, even for Holo.

"P-perhaps that is so, but I still cannot accept it. I'll not be satisfied unless we give chase," insisted Holo, despite her flagging enthusiasm.

Even if half of Holo's fixation on following Eve was based on a grudge she carried, the other half was certainly not.

And that was why she was so angry with herself.

Holo had said she wanted to end her travels with Lawrence.

Her reasoning was that they got along too well, that she was afraid of the joy they shared weathering and crumbling away.

In opposition, Lawrence admitted that he understood it would be impossible for their travels to continue forever but insisted that when they did go their separate ways, it should be with smiles upon their faces.

Naturally there was always that temptation to keep prolonging their travels, even knowing it would come to naught in the end—just as Lawrence sometimes drank too much, despite knowing he would regret it the next morning. And in such a case, he found himself unable to deny the possibility that Holo's fears would come true.

But at the very least, he wanted to go with Holo as far as her homeland—so he had gone back to the Delink Company to fetch her.

And now, having said all that, despite what they might wish, there was one obvious thing that remained unsaid between them.

This was a detour that would extend their time together.

"I understand why you wouldn't be satisfied by that..."

"I'm right, am I not?" Holo's face was at once angry and pleased.

Lawrence found himself impressed that such an expression existed.

"And it's true that this is a net loss so far..."

When Eve decided she had to terminate her agreement with Lawrence, she'd left behind the deed to the inn in which he and Holo now stood. When Lawrence had used Holo as collateral to borrow money, the amount he borrowed was very nearly equivalent to the value of the inn.

But it had come a little short.

The Delink Company's original goal had been to strengthen their relationship with the noble Eve, and having accomplished that, Lawrence doubted they would quibble over the minor discrepancy—and he was right.

Yet when would that lingering debt be called in—and where and how? It made doing business frightening.

Even if it took some time, Lawrence wanted to repay what debt remained.

Which meant he was right now in the red.

Of course, the debt was not outside the realm of what could be forgiven, and when Holo heard this, she perked up, agreeing wholeheartedly. "Aye. And she drew blood from you, do not forget! I'll make her understand that when one harms my companion, they harm me!"

It was only with effort that Lawrence restrained himself from asking her just who it was who had struck him hard in the face in a fit of passion earlier.

"So it's pursuit, is it?"

"Aye. My first hunt in quite some time," Holo said with a grin.

Her smile lacked its usual grim quality, perhaps because both of them were trying their best to smooth things over so they could extend their travels with a detour.

After the affair in the wheat village of Tereo, both Holo and Lawrence had confessed to wishing their journey would continue.

Now that he thought about it, it was a rather naive wish—but that was all in the past now.

People's hearts change.

The only thing that didn't change was the ever-dishonest repartee he shared with Holo.

"Don't forget, though—," began Lawrence, at which Holo looked up at him, her expression serious. "—I am a merchant. I have my pride and my honor, but I'm not some knight who earns money only to bring himself fame. If it seems as though this will only worsen my losses, we'll pursue her no further. Do you understand?"

If it would lengthen his travels with Holo, Lawrence would put off doing business until the summer of next year, but if it took any longer than that, problems would start popping up. Business

was conducted in the service of mutual gain between parties, so if Lawrence alone was the only one ready to deal, nothing would come of it.

Of course, it would be a different story if only Holo would say that she wanted to travel with him forever.

"I do this only for you," said Holo. "So long as you are satisfied... aye. It cannot be helped."

Her words were strange, but Lawrence nodded. "I appreciate it," he said by way of thanks to an oddly considerate Holo.

Holo's ears flicked up beneath her hood, either because of the ridiculousness of the exchange or out of happiness at having fought the good fight in service of drawing out their travels a little longer.

Actually it was probably both.

"Well then, how shall we go about this pursuit?" said Lawrence.

"How? Will we not go by wagon?" asked Holo.

Lawrence scratched the tip of his nose as he answered. "It will take perhaps five days by wagon. Do you think you can endure that?"

When they'd finally arrived in this town, Holo had been so tired from travel that it made her unpleasant to be around.

Embarking again on a long, frigid journey would be exhausting, and Lawrence himself did not find the prospect appealing.

Unsurprisingly, Holo's face immediately darkened. "Ugh... five days on the wagon..."

"There are a scattering of villages between here and there—and inns, too, but they're far from luxurious."

Churches would have made the most attractive places to stay on a trip like this, but unfortunately this was one region where churches were hard to find.

The only options would be meager inns or homes and shops that took boarders as a sideline.

Lawrence did not relish the prospect of sleeping in a dusty, grimy inn next to a man that might well be a brigand or bandit.

"W-well, if that's so, then what of the river?"

"The river?"

"Aye. If that vixen escaped by the river, we ought follow her. 'Tis the most obvious course."

That meant taking a ship. Lawrence cocked his head as he remembered the state of the docks as Holo had dragged him past them.

Would it be possible for a couple of travelers to easily board a ship heading downriver?

"Well, that depends on whether there's a ship—," began Lawrence honestly, but Holo waved her hand (which still held Lawrence's) impatiently.

"Not 'whether'! We will find one!"

Lawrence stared at Holo as if to say, "Don't be unreasonable," but her eyes only glittered strangely.

He had a bad feeling about this.

Lawrence tried to escape.

But Holo only cornered him again. "Or is my plan...too much trouble?"

This time she really was looking up at him imploringly.

"If 'tis too much of a bother, do please say so. 'Tis only for your sake that I wish to track down that vixen, but...I know that from time to time, I do act a bit rashly. Come now," said Holo, taking Lawrence's hand and clasping it to her breast.

He was glad she was back to her usual self, but it made her all the more formidable.

After all, she had acquired a new weapon.

"I was so happy, you see," said Holo, her tone suddenly soft and her eyes now downcast.

Alas! thought Lawrence to himself as he gazed at her terrifying mien.

"I was so happy, yes—happy that you said you loved me. So please—"

"Fine, fine! We'll find a boat and head downriver! Will that be enough?"

Holo wore an expression of exaggerated surprise, then smiled broadly.

She brought his hand from her breast to her lips, as if to kiss it, but then her sharp teeth glinted from behind those lips.

Lawrence had lost this contest, it was safe to say.

It was no exaggeration to call this an unavoidably desperate strategy, but there is always a reward for those willing to put such a desperate strategy into action.

And so it was.

He had spoken plainly to Holo.

It was precisely because he had been so honest that opposing her was now impossible.

It was as though he had handed her a completely unsecured contract sealed in blood.

With that in hand as she grinned, all she needed to do was pretend at using it to defeat him, and Lawrence could only flinch away.

After all, what was written on that contract was the truth.

"Well then, shall we hurry and pack our things?" Holo asked, lowering her hand.

"...What?" Lawrence asked back.

"We are going to the trouble of traveling by ship," replied Holo, her face serious. "Do you not wish to eat some wheaten bread first?"

Lawrence flatly rejected the notion.

Holo protested violently, but Lawrence was unmoved.

She might have a grip upon his reins, but his purse strings were still his own. "Did I not just explain that we've taken a loss?"

"All the more reason, then! If we're already in the red, we may as well drive the figure up!"

"What sort of reasoning is that?!" said Lawrence.

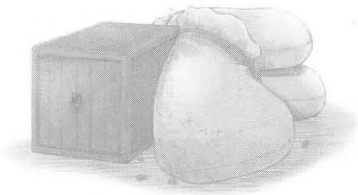
Holo's lip curled as she sneered. "I thought you loved me."

Even the strongest weapon, if overused, could be defended against.

"Aye, that's true. But I also love money," replied Lawrence seriously.

Immediately Holo's expression went flat, and she stomped on Lawrence's foot with all her might.

CHAPTER ONE



"Ahoy there, you fool! Pull in that prow! I'm carrying silver from Imidra!"

"What's that? We were here first! You pull in your prow!"

Angry shouts echoed constantly across the water as hulls collided and sent sprays of water into the air.

Lenos's harbor buzzed like an angry beehive. Lawrence heard a shout that might have been a war cry or might have been a death howl, followed by the sound of something splashing into the water.

The normally calm surface of the water was constantly disturbed by waves.

And there amid the angry cries of horses and men, ships fought to leave the harbor ahead of one another, each no doubt loaded heavy with furs. Any boat that could normally take a single rower was being hired out as a special express.

It was easy to understand, though—in any business, the biggest profits were always realized by the first to arrive.

But Lawrence regarded their struggles with cold eyes.

The first to arrive would be a certain fallen noblewoman bearing thousands of silver pieces' worth of furs.

"Come, do not stand there gawping—we must find a ship!"

"I suppose it's a bit late to ask, but are you quite all right aboard a ship?"

Given the situation, it would take some luck to find a vessel that was willing to take on a couple of casual passengers. The line of ships waiting to exit the harbor was like an ant trail.

"You were the one who said the wagon would take too much time and be too much trouble."

"Well, yes, but..."

Lawrence couldn't see anything, but loud voices seemed to be coming from the place where the harbor exited to the river.

It seemed likely that those who wanted to stop the flow of furs from the town were trying to seal off the port.

"..."

"What?" Lawrence asked.

"You're in no hurry to board."

"No, that's not it."

Even a child could tell he was lying. Holo raised one eyebrow as she glared at him. "Well, then let us find a vessel."

Since it had been quickly apparent that finding a craft that could take a horse downriver would be difficult, Lawrence had left his horse at a vacant stable whose beasts had all been rented out. The wagon he rented out at the docks through a connection of the stable master's.

Like it or not, they would no longer be traveling by wagon.

And as the port town of Kerube would be crawling with merchants passing the winter there, he might well be able to do some business there.

Oh well, Lawrence murmured inwardly. "Fine, fine. I'll go find a boat. You go pick up some food from that stall over there. Three days' worth should be enough. And wine—the stronger the better."

He handed Holo two glimmering silver pieces from his coin purse.

"And what of wheat bread?"

Holo had a good grasp of the market and knew that the amount she'd been given wouldn't buy wheat bread.

"Bread needs yeast to make it rise. So, too, does money to buy that bread."

"..."

Wheat bread had been out of the question after the conversation in the inn.

Though Holo gave a frustrated nod, her frustration was not especially deep.

She quickly looked up again. "Why then the strong liquor?"

Evidently she had figured out that Lawrence generally preferred wine that was easy to drink. It made him happy that she was remembering his likes and dislikes and not only at the tailors' and cobblers' shops.

His reply, though, was brief; he did not let his pleasure show. "You'll understand soon enough."

Holo stared at him blankly for a moment, then seemed pleased as she smacked his arm. Surely she had misunderstood. "I'll haggle them down and be sure to load up on the good stuff, then, eh?"

"We don't need it in volume."

"Aye. Shall we meet back up somewhere around there?"

"Yes...ouch—!" Lawrence nodded, but the movement caused the swelling where Eve had struck him to suddenly throb with pain.

He was just agonizing over whether he should have a medicine or salve mixed for it when he noticed Holo's expression and thought better of it.

She was worried about him—perhaps it was better that way.

"...Your thoughts are quite obvious," Holo said.

"I was taught as a child that honesty is a virtue."

"And do you really think so?" Holo gave him a bright, guileless smile and cocked her head.

"I suppose my master also taught me that honesty is a fool's errand."

Holo chuckled through her nose, then teased, "So much so that I can't help making fun of you." She spun about with a dancer's grace, then walked off into the crowd.

Lawrence slumped and sighed, scratching his head.

A smile rose to his lips; these tête-à-têtes were a joy, it was true.

And yet, he thought, *will I never regain the upper hand, I wonder?*

He was confident he could at least get back the deed that had been swindled away, but that seemed like sour grapes.

I love you.

It had been only a short while ago, yet already the moment when he'd faced Holo and spoken those words seemed like the distant past. Thinking back on it, Lawrence was tormented by some nameless feeling.

The strange emotion made his face twitch and his breathing labored.

And yet—it was not a bad feeling.

The elusive thing had a definite sense of calmness, of peace about it.

It was only a bit—no, a good bit—embarrassing; the bit of regret he felt probably came from having lost the contest.

"What contest?" he asked himself with a derisive smile, looking in the direction in which Holo had disappeared.

He shrugged and sighed, then walked in the direction of the pier.

* * *

Lawrence soon found a ship, which was possibly fortunate and certainly unexpected.

Though the port was jammed with people desperate to send out a vessel, when Lawrence calmed himself and looked more closely, he saw that there were many ships loading up cargo per the usual routine, and when he called out to one, he received a ready reply. With every ship being so busy, Lawrence expected the fares to be exorbitant, but they were actually quite reasonable.

Lawrence pretended not to notice the tension melt away from the aged captain's face when he mentioned his female companion.

He understood why Eve went to such efforts to hide her face and her sex when doing business.

"Still, what business could you have in Kerube? No respectable boat will be headed there in this season."

The captain had the unfamiliar name of Ibn Ragusa and explained that he was from a poor, chilly village at the northern end of the western coastline.

By repute, people from the far north were lean and snow tanned, taciturn and keen eyed, but Ragusa was round and effusive with a complexion more ruddy than tan.

"Unsurprisingly, it has to do with the fur trade."

"Oh?" Ragusa looked Lawrence up and down skeptically, cocking his head, his neck imperceptible between beefy shoulders. "You don't look like you have any cargo."

"My onetime business partner made off with it." Lawrence pointed to the still-swollen part of his face. Ragusa laughed with gusto, his face looking for all the world like a puffer fish.

He slapped Lawrence's shoulder as if to say such things happen, then asked, "So, where is this companion of yours?"

"Ah, she's off buying rations—," Lawrence began, turning in the

direction of the row of venders—but then he felt a presence at his side.

There was Holo, standing as though she had been there for years.

"—And here she is."

"Oh ho! Such a fine cargo!" boomed Ragusa with a clap of his hands, so loudly that Holo's shoulders flinched.

Sailors, as a rule, were a loud-voiced lot.

Too loud, no doubt, for Holo, whose hearing was so keen she could hear the sound of someone furrowing his brow.

"By the by, what's her name?"

Perhaps thinking they were a married couple, Ragusa asked Lawrence rather than inquiring of Holo directly.

In any case, he was nothing like the moneychanger that had once tried to seduce Holo immediately upon meeting her.

A bag holding bread or the like hung from Holo's shoulder, and under an arm, she carried a small cask. Looking every inch the apprentice nun returning from an errand, she looked up at Lawrence.

That she was keeping up appearances in front of other people was one of the reasons, Lawrence mused, that even if she teased him, he would be unable to be angry with her.

"It's Holo."

"Ho! A fine name! Pleased to meet you. I'm Ragusa, master of the Roam River!"

Any man would be eager to boast in front of such a comely maiden.

Ragusa spoke as though it was the most obvious thing in the world for such a girl to be traveling with Lawrence, and he extended his meaty, calloused hand out in greeting. "But this means we'll be sure to make the passage downriver safely, too!"

"Meaning...?"

Ragusa grinned and guffawed, patting Holo's slender shoulder. "The market's declared that it should be a beautiful maiden that's fitted to a ship's prow to pray for her safety!"

It was true that the prows of long-distance trading ships were generally decorated with a carving of a female figure.

Sometimes they represented a pagan goddess; other times, they were of a sainted woman from the Church's history. (Lawrence did have the sense that it was always a woman that watched over a ship, and ships were often given female names as well.)

Still, he felt like Holo was a bit out of her depth in this capacity—she was a wolf, better suited to hearing prayers for safe overland travel than any sort of waterborne voyage.

The image of Holo dog-paddling through the water came to mind; Lawrence couldn't help but smile slightly to himself.

"So, are you ready? We're not scheming to move fur like everybody else is, but we do have some cargo that needs to be hurried," said Ragusa.

"Ah, er, yes. Were you able to procure food?" Lawrence asked of Holo, who nodded.

Given that she was a wolf, Holo was awfully good at playing the innocent little lamb.

"Then go ahead and sit anywhere that's free. You'll pay up when we get there."

The custom of paying upon arrival was only tenable for water vessels—being surrounded by water made riding for free difficult.

"Just pretend you're riding on a great ship," finished Ragusa with a great laugh, every inch the sailor.

Among the vessels that plied the river, carrying cargo up and down it, Ragusa's was a bit on the small side.

It had no sails, and the bottom was flat—but despite that, the boat was rather slender and long. Had it been any narrower, it



would have been easy for an inexperienced captain to accidentally capsize it.

Directly in the middle of the boat was a waist-high pile of burlap sacks, each of which was easily big enough to fit Holo inside. From their overflowing mouths, Lawrence could tell they were filled with wheat and legumes.

Directly astern of that pile were several wooden crates.

Since Lawrence could hardly open them up and peek inside, he couldn't say for sure what their contents were, but given the seals or crests that had been branded upon the crates—which were all of a similar size—he assumed they were relatively valuable. This was certainly the cargo that needed to be hurried. Like any merchant, Lawrence found himself curious about what they contained.

If the crates had been brought from farther upriver, they could contain ore out of a silver or copper mine or perhaps small-value coins minted near an iron mine and destined for export. Tin or iron wouldn't have been so carefully crated, and it would be equally strange to transport gemstones without so much as a single guard.

Owing to the low level of the river, the amount of cargo aboard the vessel was quite small relative to its capacity.

There was little rainfall during this season, and thanks to heavy snowfall in the mountains, the river's headwaters were frozen over. This caused the water level to drop and made it easier for a heavily laden boat to run aground. Just as a wagon's wheels could be easily mired in a muddy road on a rainy day, a boat running aground was a fact of life. In the worst of such cases, cargo would have to be thrown overboard, and worst of all, it was an obstruction to other shipping traffic, which could damage the reputation of the shipmaster responsible.

It was said that the very best of those who spent their lives ply-

ing the river could man the tiller with their eyes closed, no matter what the river's state.

So what of Ragusa?

Lawrence thought it over as he took a seat in an open space near the boat's prow, setting down the blankets and supplies he carried.

The surface of the water in the harbor sloshed drunkenly, and the boat's rocking was slight but constant. Lawrence hadn't felt the sensation in some time, and it made him nostalgic; he smiled ruefully. The first time he had ridden in a boat, he had been so afraid that it would flip that he had held tight to the vessel's edge.

Now it seemed as though he had not been exceptionally nervous.

He had to smile when he saw Holo edge ever so carefully up beside him to sit. She set down the cask of wine under her arm, unslung the bag of delicious-smelling food from her shoulder, then finally noticed Lawrence's gaze. She glared back at him.

"What's so funny?" she asked. Her low voice was no act.

"I was just thinking I used to be as nervous as you are."

"Mmph... I've no particular fear of water, but 'tis unsettling indeed when the craft rocks."

It was strange for her to so readily admit to being afraid.

She curled her lip, irritated at his obvious surprise. "It is because I trust you that I would admit weakness."

"I can see your teeth behind that sneer."

Once Lawrence had pointed it out, Holo quickly stifled her sneer, then smiled unpleasantly. It was certainly true that she had been scared, but admitting to that fear was pure calculation.

Lawrence didn't know if she was actually being agreeable or not.

The next instant, Holo straightened suddenly. "This won't do. I cannot start getting along with you now," she said, turning her

head aside sadly. She had said before that no matter how enjoyable her time with Lawrence was, she was afraid of eventually tiring of it. Lawrence felt a shock, as though he had touched something very hot.

He soon corrected himself—Holo was not being so serious at this moment.

Even without bothering to ask, he knew what it was that they had to avoid. Knowing there were traps ahead but not knowing exactly where would make it hard to walk—but if one knew where the cliff's edge was, skirting along it was easy enough.

Venturing to say as much was neither cause for Holo to admonish herself, nor was it reason for Lawrence to be on guard.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

They would end their travels with a smile. Having promised each other that much, there was nothing to be afraid of.

Lawrence calmed himself and answered, "That sounds like a line out of a stage play."

He didn't say the rest of what he was thinking, which was that it sounded like a line out of a stage play about forbidden love.

In response, Holo—perhaps irritated at Lawrence's failure to be properly flustered—looked his way quickly. "Could you not just play along?"

"Not so long as your face is so malicious."

Holo's upturned eyes had given her face a desolate cast, but then she sniggered and clicked her tongue.

Lawrence smiled, at a loss—this wolf's expression could change awfully quickly.

Not a moment later, Ragusa came running down the pier, his footsteps banging loudly as he shouted in his characteristically booming voice, "Well then, let us be off!"

He quickly untied the boat from its mooring, then tossed the rope aboard, following it himself with a leap like a boy jumping

into a river—no mean feat. Ragusa could hardly be called thin, even as rank flattery, and the boat heaved beneath the sudden weight, listing so far to one side that it seemed like it might capsize.

Even Lawrence was alarmed—to say nothing of Holo, whose body stiffened as her face turned serious.

Her hands gripped Lawrence's clothes tightly, and this was surely no joke.

"Watch the finest ship handling in three kingdoms!" said Ragusa mightily, thrusting a long pole into the water and heaving down on it, his ruddy face turning even redder.

At first the boat seemed not to respond to Ragusa's cry, but soon its stern slowly drew away from the wharf. Ragusa lightly raised the pole and, adjusting its direction, pushed down again.

The craft, loaded with enough goods that it would take fully four horses to haul them all, was moving under the power of one man.

Sailors were famous for their boasting, but Lawrence felt like he understood where it came from now.

Ragusa was moving the entire boat by himself, after all.

Having pulled away from the boat's mooring, Ragusa now poled the craft along the route that led to the river.

Despite the constant flow of waterborne traffic, they didn't collide with a single other vessel as they glided easily over the rippling water.

Ragusa seemed to know most of the vessels they passed and gave most of them friendly greetings—though he occasionally exchanged angry shouts and raised poles with some.

They gradually gained speed, which the long craft grew more stable with, and soon they approached the port's exit to the river.

At the wooden tower, which served as a checkpoint at the border of the port, was a group of men who were trying to stop the flow of furs, and having forced their way past the town guard, they

hurled curses at the boats that had managed to break through this last line of defense.

The vicissitudes of fortune were ever thus.

Men wearing chain mail and iron helms came to the entrance of the tower. They were probably mercenaries and knights who had been specially retained for the occasion.

The boat carrying Lawrence and Holo rounded the tower, and as it entered the river proper, one man yelling curses from the very top of the tower was restrained by the mercenaries. Lawrence wasn't feeling especially sympathetic, but at the same time, he hoped there would be no fatalities.

As he watched, the things that had happened to him in the town came floating vaguely to his mind.

Just as the men in the tower were now in real trouble, Lawrence himself had only just faced his own problems.

He had been shocked by Holo's suggestion that they end their travels together and shocked again by her reasoning.

In the end, the feeling had pierced Lawrence's selfishness, but he decided that was what Holo had wanted.

Thinking back on the scene, it made him want to show Holo—who was far from comfortable in the unfamiliar boat—a little kindness.

But such kindness was always for naught.

Somewhere along the line, Holo seemed to have recovered, and though she still held fast to Lawrence's clothing, she now looked intently past the vessel's prow and along the river.

Her profile was inarguably intrepid.

"Hmm?" She seemed to notice Lawrence's gaze and looked up at him questioningly.

She always knew precisely how she appeared to others.

Lawrence wearily looked the other way, gazing at the town of Lenos as they left it behind.

He heard a giggle.

"Your kindness is so very frightful," said Holo, chuckling, letting go of Lawrence's clothing.

Her head ducked, Holo's breath escaped from her mouth and flowed whitely past her as they moved. This couldn't be helped, not even if he wanted to pluck the fur from the little devil's tail.

Still, it was cold upon the river. She couldn't very well afford to lose her tail.

Lawrence replied slowly, "For my part, I'm afraid of your smile."

"Fool." Holo's smile shined from underneath her hood.

As it flows gently past the town of Lenos from east to west through the grasslands, the Roam River is a perfectly normal river.

In the spring and early summer when the water level is higher, they say the shipments of lumber that are floated down the river are an amazing sight, looking like some great water serpent, but at the moment, all they could see both fore and aft was the orderly line of boats.

There were also sheep drinking at the river and travelers walking alongside it and the clouds floating gently overhead.

If Holo was motivated by curiosity, she was also quick to lose interest. She rested her chin on the edge of the ship's hull, her face a mask of understandable boredom, occasionally dangling her fingertips in the water and sighing.

"There's nothing to do," she muttered, at which a dozing Lawrence, curled up in the same blanket as she was, woke, yawned, and stretched.

"Mmph. I'm just happy not to have to be holding the reins."

It was nice not to have to concentrate on avoiding the countless holes in the road, and there was no need to be on a constant lookout for the hawks that might set their eyes on his cargo.

Above all, there was no need to rub his eyes constantly to stay

awake even when exhausted, listening to his companion snore while he became more irritated by the moment.

It was enough to make him want to travel by boat all the time, but Holo seemed to already be too bored to stand it. She withdrew her hand that had disturbed the water's glassy surface and flicked droplets toward Lawrence.

The winter water was very cold.

Lawrence made a face, and Holo turned away and leaned against the side of the boat, removing her tail, which covered his feet, and pulling it back to her hands.

As Ragusa napped on the other side of the loaded cargo, there was no need for concern.

"Why don't you try counting sheep? I'm sure you'd go to sleep eventually."

"I was counting until a moment ago. I gave up around seventy-two." Holo brushed her hands quickly through her tail, combing out bits of debris and matted fur.

With each brush, flea-like things popped out of her fur, but even if she'd been worried about them, there was nothing to be done.

It was enough to make Lawrence believe the talk of being kept awake by the sound of jumping fleas and lice during warm summer nights.

"Anyway," Holo continued, "counting sheep will only make me hungry."

"That won't do. You'd best stop."

Holo flicked a captured flea at Lawrence.

It was a meaningless gesture as they were sharing the same blanket.

"Still," she said, bringing her tail up to her face and burying it in the thick fur, putting the tail in order with her mouth. "Once we've made it down the river and taken the vixen to task, what then?"

She skillfully groomed herself as she talked, but when she finished speaking and opened her mouth, it was covered in fur. She probably needed to prepare for the shedding of her coat once spring arrived.

The thought occurred to Lawrence as he lent a hand to remove some of the fur that was clinging to Holo's mouth despite her efforts to brush it free. "Here, hold still... What then, you ask?"

"Aye. After."

Holo narrowed her eyes as the fur was plucked from her; her somewhat solicitous tone was surely meant more to distract Lawrence's attention from the tightrope he walked rather than strictly to tease him.

The best course of action that Holo and Lawrence could take, as well as the things they could and couldn't do, had been decided in Lenos.

But that decision did not include any real notion of what would happen after.

"Food and amusements are plentiful where we're going, so we could easily wait until the snow melts in the mountains. Or if we're in a hurry, we could arrange for horses back to Lenos, then head north."

"Into the Roef Mountains, you mean."

It was the direction from which Holo had come.

If they hurried, the trip would take less than a month. If they moved in earnest, their travels together could end in mere days.

Holo grasped her tail in an especially maidenly fashion.

Lawrence studied her.

She was begging him to lie to her.

"Still, the mountains change when people get into them. If we head up the Roef River, we might well lose our way." Lawrence mused upon what a high-maintenance wolf he had for a companion as he plucked another bit of brown fur from her mouth and

continued. "If we got as far as Nyohhira, you'd know the way, correct? My guess is it would take ten days from Lenos to Nyohhira. If we can't wait for spring, it will be closer to twenty days—we'll need to take a path that runs through as many towns and villages as possible." He counted off on his fingers, unsure of whether that was long or short.

Keep your stays short and your travels long.

The principle was always in his mind as he traveled for business, and even this proposal was leisurely enough to inspire a nagging guilt. When doing business, half of his sales went to paying tariffs and taxes; a further 30 percent went to travel and lodging costs, leaving 20 percent as profit—so a slower, more expensive route hardly sat well with Lawrence.

Yet still, the trip was short enough that when it was over, he knew he would regret it.

He counted on his fingers, then stopped, staring at the next digit, wondering if there was some way he could count it.

"Ten days for a leisurely soak in the hot springs of Nyohhira," said Holo, reaching out and counting off Lawrence's last finger.

With their hands overlapping like that, they looked like a married couple trying to keep each other warm.

And indeed, Lawrence smiled broadly, his heart warmed.

Holo looked up and beamed.

It was a terrifying smile.

Ten days' stay in Nyohhira. If ever a thing was to bring a smile to his face and warmth to his heart, that would be it.

There was no telling how much ten nights' lodging in a hot springs town would cost. The inn bills could be high, taking advantage of travelers, and the food unpleasant yet expensive. Fresh water was priced unbelievably, and the liquor was thin and poor. There was a fee to enter the baths, and the strongest mineral springs required two daily checkups by a physicker

in order to use them. It was quite literally money down the drain.

And yet, given the timing of Holo's request, he could not very well refuse.

The wisewolf was endlessly cunning.

If he had to be less than honest about his feelings, he might as well smile and feel good about it.

"You are making your money-counting face," Holo said, pulling Lawrence's hand to her cheek and nuzzling it, her expression malicious.

Her tail swished about suggestively.

Lawrence considered taking and nuzzling that tail instead.

"There were people there when I passed through, and even I would take human form and use the hot springs sometimes, so I understand the system. But I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. If there's no one there, you need only add a little bit to your expenses."

That was certainly the case, but hot springs were places where those who would do anything to extend their lives even a second longer would gather, and even if killed, they did not die.

Such places took on the sense of a pilgrimage, and the harder it was to reach a spring, the more potent its water was said to be, so the most remote locations gained a sort of fame.

Though it was highly doubtful that Holo could find a hot spring that hadn't already been discovered, one thing was certain.

The "little bit" that Lawrence would have to add to his usual food and lodging expenses would be anything but little.

"Every time you make me spend a bit more on food, my own dreams get that much further away." If Lawrence didn't warn Holo off, there was no telling what she would ask of him next.

Holo immediately gave him a nasty look, but Lawrence couldn't back down.

Not even as outmaneuvered as he was now, having told Holo that he loved her to her face.

"I have a variety of ways to tease you, but first," said Holo with a cough and a flick of her tail, "are you not the one who kicked aside his dream of owning a store and instead came for me?"

She looked up at him, testing him.

Her red-brown eyes glittered through the whitish breath that escaped from between her thin lips.

"For one thing, I may have kicked it aside, but I didn't give up on it."

Holo sighed deeply, as though asking whether he expected that excuse to work.

And in truth, some part of it was a lie.

Holo could easily see through such lies and had quite probably already done so, but before it was pointed out to him, Lawrence decided to come clean.

"Though I suppose I did kick it aside in earnest, more or less."

"'Tis the nature of merchants to use vague words to leave themselves loopholes, I suppose," said Holo, exasperated.

Lawrence revised his statement. "No, I truly kicked it aside."

"I'll wait to suggest wasting some money until after I hear your reason for doing so."

Lawrence agonized for a moment; he wanted to say, "Thank you ever so kindly," but instead shrugged and answered this way: "If I opened a shop, I expect I'd take about half as much pleasure in actually doing business."

"...Huh?"

"When the moment that I'd been waiting for was finally upon me, I suddenly realized it—that once I had a shop, my days of adventuring would be over."

It wasn't as though he was no longer enticed by the smell of profit.

But privileging that goal over all others, unmoved by whatever storms might come, focusing solely on material gain—he no longer wanted that.

If he got the shop now, it would be wasted on him, precisely because he had been chasing it for so long and with such single-minded focus.

Holo swept aside her joking expression, murmuring "hmm" to herself.

Surely Holo understood this, as she herself feared today's joy eventually turning to sorrow.

"Still, you should take into consideration that I feel this way because it was my dream for so long. If I were to get a shop, it wouldn't be an unhappy thing."

Holo nodded slowly, but her face was confused as she replied, "Aye, I suppose... there was some misfortune."

"Yes... wait, what? Misfortune?" asked Lawrence at the word he failed to understand, whereupon Holo made a face as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Yes, was there not? You had a dream but cast it aside and came for me instead. It's enough to make even the person who first said the words 'he who chases two rabbits will catch neither' throw their hands up in dismay."

Even as Lawrence realized his mouth was hanging open, he couldn't manage to close it as he rotated his head toward her.

No matter how many times he reconsidered it, Holo's words pointed to but one fact.

He had abandoned one rabbit in order to chase another but had failed to catch it.

An unpleasant emotion boiled up in Lawrence's mind, as though he'd dropped his coin purse.

If this is a joke, I wish she would stop, he thought to himself, turning away. He then looked back at Holo and saw on her face

an expression of sad concern, as though she was worried for Lawrence's health.

"Are you quite all right? Come now, take heart. After all, you haven't gained a thing, have you?"

Was it anger or sadness or something else entirely?

The same instant Lawrence wondered if Holo was speaking another language, she curled the corners of her mouth up maliciously, her tongue peeking out between her lips.

"Heh. In truth, have you even reached out to me? What a strange notion, to gain something without first reaching for it."

Lawrence had never wanted to dunk Holo underwater as much as he did that moment, mostly because she was looking at the face he least wanted others to see.

Holo chuckled. "Though I suppose 'tis not as though such territory is marked with visible ropes. How you consider that is up to you," she said, drawing nearer to Lawrence, nestling close to him as one wolf does to another.

Her white breath puffed against the nape of his neck.

He knew if he looked at her, he would be defeated.

And by the time he realized that, he was defeated.

"In the end, 'tis my wish that you not abandon your dream. And if you find owning a shop satisfying, you might next take an apprentice, might you not? 'Tis a rather profound thing, and you'll never have a day of rest," said Holo, snickering and pulling her face away.

Lawrence wondered if this was how a fish felt after being stripped to the bone.

No matter how he struggled, his situation could hardly improve.

So as not to expose anything more unseemly than he already had, he took a deep breath, then exhaled.

Holo laughed quietly as though enjoying the lingering moment.

"Wait, have you ever taken an apprentice?" Lawrence's voice was still slightly tense, but Holo overlooked it.

"Hmm? Oh yes. I am Holo the Wisewolf, after all. Many wished to learn from me."

"Huh."

Forgetting about the conversation thus far, Lawrence found himself genuinely impressed.

Whereupon Holo, possibly not expecting that, turned suddenly bashful.

She may well have been exaggerating in a deliberate attempt to make up for her too-keen teasing. "Well, I do not know if you could quite properly call them 'apprentices,' though I'm sure they styled themselves as such. In any case, I was the greatest. If you wanted to receive my teachings, hmm. You'd have had to wait behind a hundred certainly."

Holo now spoke proudly in a complete about-face—but Lawrence found himself unable to laugh at her the way he usually would.

When he thought about it, Holo was certainly worthy of such respect.

But what made him feel such unease at the dignity she surely possessed were the many memories of her that came rising to his mind.

He couldn't reconcile this supposedly majestic being with the Holo he knew—who laughed, cried, and sulked.

Holo's expression shifted to a soft smile, and she took Lawrence's hand. "Of course, you do not just seek my teachings; you would try to take my reins—a rare fool, indeed. You can't hope to succeed, but there's no mistaking that you wish to look into my eyes as an equal. I've been alone on the mountaintop for a long time. I've had quite enough of looking down on others."

It was a lonely thing being worshipped as a god.

He remembered when they first met, and Holo had said that she had gone traveling to find a friend.

Holo's smile remained, though it was a bit lonely now. "Come now, you did come after me, did you not?"

The words themselves were teasing, but paired with her lonely smile, he could hardly imagine they were meant that way.

Lawrence couldn't help the bitter smile that rose to his lips, which Holo made a sullen face at.

When he put his arm around her shoulder and drew her near, he felt her sigh.

He wondered if the note of satisfaction he detected in that sigh was just his imagination.

"But now, I...," she began, again turning her body so that her eyes looked directly up into his. "I truly, truly enjoy looking up at you thus."

There beside him, she looked for all the world like a fetching maiden with gaze upturned.

Though he might become accustomed to their exchanges, this was one thing he could never get used to.

"No doubt because the face you're looking up to is a fool's face indeed," answered Lawrence with a wince, and the wolf girl clung to him in delight.

Holo's tail wagged, sending fleas jumping free, as though they couldn't be expected to stay on such an appendage. *It stands to reason,* Lawrence thought to himself, a warmth rising in his chest. Holo smiled, her face pressed against him.

Lawrence returned the smile. It was true—their exchanges were so foolish that if they were seen this way, even the most faithful apprentice would have a hard time calling him master.

Lawrence murmured an excuse to himself—that if it was what Holo wanted, there was nothing else to be done.

* * *

Suddenly there were signs of someone moving on the other side of the pile of cargo, and sure enough, there was Ragusa, strange lines pressed into his face, as though he'd used his arm as a pillow, and stretching hugely.

He first looked at Lawrence, then cast his gaze at Holo, who leaned against Lawrence, sleeping. Ragusa grinned and yawned.

When Lawrence looked ahead of the boat to where Ragusa pointed, he saw docks built up on both sides of the river. It was a tariff station, just like the ones that were unavoidable when crossing mountains and plains by wagon.

There was still some distance to go before they reached it, but apparently Ragusa could doze off and still know from experience when to wake. It was said that sailors could orient themselves at sea not by using landmarks, but simply from the smell of the ocean. Perhaps Ragusa was like this as well. Ragusa thrust a pole into the river and cried out, causing the pleasantly sleeping Holo to twitch awake.

"This is a checkpoint of the Diejin dukedom, which recently had a change of leadership. We'll include the head count tax in your fare—apparently he's mad about deer hunting, so taxes are high, my friend!"

Lawrence replied that he didn't see the connection between deer hunting and high taxes, and Ragusa laughed and answered, "The duke's never seen the field of battle, yet he proclaims himself the finest shot in the world with a bow. In other words, he thinks he can't but loose an arrow without hitting a deer."

While the hardships of retainers who had to hunt with the duke would be hidden, it would mean good work for the hunters in the region who hunted and killed the duke's prey ahead of time.

Lawrence couldn't help but chuckle at what sprang to mind—a



round-faced, ringlet-haired lord oblivious to the ways of the world and the laughingstock of the town.

"Ah," said Lawrence. "It must be quite a burden on his household."

"On top of that, he's dead set on capturing the heart of his chosen princess. Of course, there's the rumor that he's started realizing the truth about his own abilities."

For some reason, the most beloved lords were often the ones most ill spoken of—an ignorant, haughty ruler might be hated, but as soon as he said some absurd thing, his charm would increase. The lording business was a difficult one since lending a careful ear to one's subjects and being serious and severe—these things did not guarantee success.

Ragusa, too, made fun of the duke, but when it came time to pay the toll, he had it ready and was by no means reluctant to hand it over.

Should war come to the land, it would be much easier for the laughingstock Duke Diejin to rally support than it would be for other lords. It was better by far to have the people feel it was their duty to join, rather than to be ordered to do so from on high.

Lawrence suddenly realized that the notion had relevance to his own situation and looked at Holo, who was right beside him.

"Have you something you wish to say?" she asked.

"No, nothing."

Ragusa gradually slowed the craft, drawing close to another boat that was nearing the checkpoint's dock.

It didn't take an experienced river hand like Ragusa to be able to tell that something was awry upon the docks.

Someone was there, arguing with a soldier who was armed with a pike.

It wasn't clear what was being said, but it was obvious enough that both parties were shouting.

The handler of the boat that was ahead of Ragusa's also watched the situation, craning his neck to see.

"Strange to see such quarreling," said Ragusa mildly, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Do you think there's a complaint about the high toll?"

"Doubtful. It's only the ones coming from the sea that complain about the taxes. They have to pay for horses to pull their craft upstream, then pay cargo taxes on top of that."

Holo yawned, showing her fangs as she gazed at the scene, then Lawrence realized something strange.

"But isn't that true for both seagoing and river-going ships?" he asked, patting Holo's head as she wiped the corners of her eyes on Lawrence's clothes.

Ragusa pulled the pole up and smiled broadly. "For those like us, who live by the river, the river is home. It's only natural to pay rent for one's home. But for the sailors of the ocean, it's merely a road. It's no wonder they're angry—anyone would be angry if they had to pay simply to walk down the road."

Lawrence nodded his understanding, impressed at the different ways of thinking.

And then, as they continued to move, the full scene came into view.

It seemed that the people quarreling at the dock were a soldier carrying a long pike and a young boy.

It was the boy who was shouting.

He was breathing hard, and the breath came out of his mouth in great white puffs. "But the seal of the duke is right here!"

His boyish voice might or might not have deepened yet.

For that to even be in question, he was young, indeed.

He looked to be perhaps twelve or thirteen. His unkempt grayish hair topped a face grimy with something—mud, perhaps—but filthy in any case. He was skinny enough that if he were to bump

into the delicate Holo, it would be hard to know who'd fall over, and the tattered clothes he wore looked likely to fall apart the next time he sneezed.

His ankles were thin, and he was shod in chilly sandals whose extreme wear was obvious at a glance. If it had been a bearded old man looking like this, the boy would have looked like the sort of hermit that collected the admiring gazes of pious types.

The boy held a sheet of old paper in his right hand, glaring at the guard as he gasped for breath.

"What is the matter?" asked Holo, annoyed that her midday nap had been disturbed.

"I don't know. Wait—shouldn't you have been able to hear what they were shouting about?"

Holo yawned. "Not even I can hear such things while napping."

"True enough. You can't even hear your own snoring."

Holo immediately stomped mercilessly on Lawrence's foot.

His objection was cut off by the soldier, who had been quiet until now, shouting back at the boy. "It's a fake, I tell you! If you don't get yourself hence, we've got other ideas!"

The soldier shifted the pike he held.

Ragusa's boat slowed still further, coming to a stop alongside the vessel that had been ahead of them, which had itself stopped just short of the dock.

Said boat's master appeared to know Ragusa, and after exchanging friendly greetings, they seemed to bow their heads a bit and have a discreet conversation.

"Who's that? The Lennon master's apprentice?"

Ragusa gestured with his chin to the master of a vessel that was already moored. The boatman's hair was graying, and he seemed older than Ragusa and his friend.

"If he were, he wouldn't be aboard ship with such a worried face."

"Mm, true. Oh, could it be…?"

As the two boatmen made light conversation, the boy on the dock trembled out of rage or cold and looked at the piece of paper he held.

He then looked back up, as if unwilling to give up, but bit his lip at the spear tip that was pointed at him.

He took a step back, then another, finally coming up to the edge of the dock.

"Mind yourself, lad," said the guard. "Now then, moving on to the toll…"

At the guard's words, the boatmen that had been watching the scene now each tended to their business.

To a man, they were unimpressed, as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

When Lawrence saw the red seal that had been impressed upon the paper the boy held, he understood what had happened.

The boy had been cheated by a dishonest merchant.

"He's been swindled."

"Hmm?"

The gray-haired boatman took his craft out, and another boat entered in its place, with Ragusa moving his own craft neatly alongside it.

Lawrence matched the swaying of the boat as he spoke into Holo's ear. "It happens sometimes. Forged tax exemption documents or fake demands of payment from a local lord. On a larger scale, tax collection authorization documents for this river have probably been caught."

"Hmm."

In most cases, such documents were probably sold at an amount far removed for how much they purported to bring in, but nonetheless, many buyers seemed to think they were real.

"I feel a bit sorry for him," said Holo.

On the river, a line of boats was forming, all heading for the checkpoint.

The guards at the checkpoint were busily scrambling to catch up with their duties after having been interrupted; behind them, the boy was now entirely forgotten.

Just as Holo said, his figure invited sympathy, but while Lawrence could understand the boy's position when he stopped to think about it, this was what happened when one let one's self be cheated.

"He'll learn something from this," said Lawrence.

Holo's gaze moved from the boy to Lawrence accusingly.

"You think me unfeeling, do you?" he asked.

"As I recall, when your own avarice caused you to stumble, you walked all over the city, desperate for aid."

Lawrence couldn't help but be vexed by the comment, yet his merchant ethics were completely opposed to giving the boy so much as a single copper piece. "Perhaps, but I was still the one doing the walking."

"Honestly."

"I'm not so cold as to turn away someone asking for help. But trying to save someone who isn't trying to save himself, well—it's no way to be a merchant. If you're going to do that, you may as well change into priests' robes and head for the nearest church."

Holo seemed to be thinking something over, as in spite of Lawrence's words, she seemed to think the boy was still quite pitiful.

Having worked thanklessly for centuries to ensure a village's good harvest, Holo possessed a strong sense of duty in spite of herself.

It was probably in her nature to want to help those who needed aid.

But it was also a reality that once one started doing so much,

there would be no end to it. The world was overflowing with people and their sorrows, but gods were too few.

Lawrence adjusted the blanket around them. "So if he'll stand up on his own, or else..."

Holo may have been kindhearted, but she was not ignorant of the ways of the world.

Feeling a reluctant sympathy for the boy, Lawrence looked in his direction, and in that moment found himself disbelieving not his eyes, but his ears.

"Master!" echoed a high voice.

The people in the area were all well used to hearing the loud conversations of the marketplace, and as a result, they could easily tell at whom the voice was directed.

The boy got to his feet and dashed straight across the dock, heedless of the guard's orders.

He was heading, of course, in the same direction that his voice was directed.

To Lawrence.

"Master! It's me! It's me!" came the words from the boy's mouth.

"Wh...wha—?"

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you! I had nothing to eat and was in a real jam! I must thank the gods for this good fortune!"

There was not a speck of happiness in the boy's face; his features were desperate.

Lawrence looked back at him, stunned, frantically searching his supposedly keen merchant's memory for the boy's face.

But all he could conclude was that he'd never known a boy that called him master, unless he was one of the children he had taught to earn their bread while on his travels.

That's when the realization hit him.

This was a desperate gamble by the boy to save his own life.

Lawrence had figured it out, but the guard figured it out a mo-

ment sooner and sent the boy tumbling down with the butt of his pike, forcing him to the ground as though planning to sew him to it. "You runt!"

The checkpoint was the symbol of whoever held power.

Any successful fraud there would undo that authority.

If things went poorly, the boy could easily be thrown into the river to drown.

Yet those light blue eyes were fixed evenly on Lawrence.

Lawrence found himself momentarily transfixed by the imploring gaze—"If I fail here I'll surely die," the boy seemed to say—when he was jolted from his reverie by a sharp elbow to the ribs from Holo. Holo was looking neither at Lawrence nor at the boy but rather off in a random direction. However, her profile spoke very clearly: "Don't forget what you just said."

The boy had stood up on his own and called for help.

"You've got some nerve, sullying the name of Duke Diejin!" yelled the guard.

The line of boats waiting to get through this checkpoint and on to the next one grew longer.

As the guards were the ones who had to take the blame for any hindrances in traffic, their store of patience with the boy—who was doing nothing but causing trouble for them—had surely reached its end.

Holding the boy against the ground with his pike, the guard pulled back his foot as if to aim a kick to the boy's rib cage, but in that moment—

"Wait, please!" cried Lawrence, just as the foot came up.

The impact could not be stopped. "Ungh," croaked the boy, froglike.

"It's true—I do know the boy!"

The guard looked up at Lawrence and hastily moved his foot away from the boy but soon seemed to grasp Lawrence's true mo-

tive. Annoyed, he looked back and forth from Lawrence to the boy, then eventually sighed and withdrew his pike handle from the boy's back.

It was obvious that the boy had been acting.

"Quite softhearted of you," said the guard's silent look.

The boy's eyes bulged, as though he couldn't believe his desperate gamble had actually worked, but as soon as he was able to grasp the situation, he got to his feet and awkwardly scrambled into Ragusa's boat.

Ragusa was retying his coin purse closed after having paid the toll but had momentarily stopped as he watched the proceedings on the dock. When the boy jumped aboard, he came back to himself.

Yet it wasn't until he met Lawrence's gaze that Ragusa managed to close his gaping mouth.

"Hey, you're holding up the line! Move your boat out!"

The guard may have only wanted to rid himself of a nuisance, but ships were in fact lining up behind them.

Ragusa turned to Lawrence and gave a little shrug, then boarded the boat himself and took his pole in hand. So long as Lawrence paid the fare, he had no cause for complaint.

Once the boy reached the boat's bow where Lawrence and Holo were, he collapsed, either out of exhaustion or sheer shock.

Holo finally looked at Lawrence.

Her face still evidenced some irritation.

"We've come this far, so I guess it can't be helped," said Lawrence, at which Holo smiled faintly, putting her hand to the boy who had collapsed at her feet, which stuck out from underneath the blanket.

While she normally appeared fond of teasing and ridiculing others, seeing her kneel and speak quietly to the lad made Holo look every bit the kindhearted nun that her clothes marked her as.

It may very well have looked nice, but Lawrence did not find it the least bit amusing.

It wasn't that he had no confidence in his own code of conduct, but now compared with Holo, he appeared quite heartless.

Having determined that the boy was uninjured, Holo helped him sit up and brought him to the edge of the boat.

Lawrence took some water out and handed it over.

The boy was in Holo's shadow, and Lawrence could see that his hand still held tight to the certificate.

Lawrence had to admire his spirit.

"Here, water," said Holo, passing it to the boy with a nudge at his shoulder.

The boy's eyes had been closed, as though he was unconscious, but they slowly opened, and his gaze flicked back and forth between Holo directly in front of him and Lawrence, who was behind her.

The moment he saw the boy's sheepish smile, Lawrence looked aside in spite of himself, remembering how a moment ago he'd been ready to abandon the boy.

"Thank…you."

It was unclear whether the boy was giving thanks for the water or for their kindness in having played along with his desperate act.

Either way, Lawrence felt a bit self-conscious, unaccustomed as he was to being thanked in a situation free from cold profit and loss calculations.

The boy must have been thirsty, for he gulped the water down rapidly despite the chilly weather, then cleared his throat and sighed, apparently satisfied.

From the look of him, it didn't seem like he'd come from Lenos. There were any number of roads with paths across the river, so the boy was probably from a town north or south along one such road.

What sort of travel had brought him here?

From the tattered sandals the boy had on, one thing was clear—it had not been an easy journey.

"When you've calmed yourself, you should sleep. Will this blanket be enough, I wonder?" asked Holo.

Aside from the blanket she and Lawrence used, they had one extra.

Holo handed it over, and the boy's eyes widened in pleasure at this unanticipated kindness. He nodded. "The blessings of God be upon both of...you..."

The boy wrapped himself in the blanket and fell asleep so rapidly one could nearly hear the thud.

Given his clothing, it would have been impossible for him to make camp and sleep outside. If things went badly, he could very well have frozen to death.

Holo watched him worriedly for a while but seemed to relax upon hearing the boy's slow, regular breathing. Her face was gentle as Lawrence had never seen it, and she softly brushed the boy's hair from his face before standing.

"Should I now do the same for you?" she asked, half-teasing, half-embarrassed.

"It's the privilege of children to be cared for so," answered Lawrence with a shrug.

Holo smiled. "From where I stand, you're still a child."

As she spoke, the boat, which until a moment ago had been picking up speed as it floated down the river, slowed. They had largely caught up with the boats ahead of them, and Ragusa had taken an interest in their new passenger. He put his pole down and called out from across the cargo.

"Quite a handful! Is he all right at least?" Ragusa asked about the boy.

Holo nodded, and Ragusa stroked his chin thoughtfully, exhaling white breath.

"I wonder who cheated him. It didn't happen this year, but come the cold season, a great number of people come from the south, and among them are swindlers aplenty. The year before last, there was a forger so skilled that not just children, but even sharp merchants were being taken in by him. Maybe people became wise to it, because since then, you hardly ever see them. The boy must have run into one of the very last ones."

Lawrence carefully removed the document from the boy's hand, which stuck out from underneath the blanket, then unrolled and read it.

It was a declaration of right to collect taxes from vessels on the Roam River, issued by Duke Herman Di Diejin.

In a perfunctorily flowing script that was mostly just hard to read were written directives to that effect, but anyone who had seen the genuine article would know this was a fake.

And of course, there was the matter of the duke's signature and seal.

"Mr. Ragusa, how do you spell Duke Diejin's name?"

"Mm, like so..."

Comparing Ragusa's answer to the signature, Lawrence found that one of the silent lowercase letters was mistaken.

"Also the seal is a fake," added Ragusa. "Copying the true seal is punishable by hanging."

Now that was interesting.

Copying the real seal meant death, but making a similar seal was no crime.

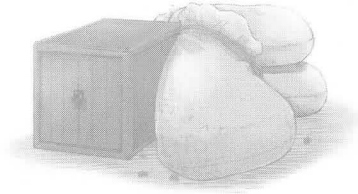
Ragusa shrugged wearily, and Lawrence carefully refolded the document and slipped it back underneath the blanket.

"You'll be paying the extra fare, though, don't forget," said Ragusa.

"Ah, er... yes. Of course."

Holo might not like it, but in the end, it was money that shaped the world.

CHAPTER TWO



The boy's name was evidently Tote Col.

After the boy had taken a short nap, Holo's stomach started growling, so Lawrence handed out some bread, which Col ate guardedly, like a wild dog.

But his features weren't especially disheveled, which made him seem more like an abandoned dog than a strictly wild one.

"So, how much did you pay for these papers?"

Col hadn't bought just one or two forgeries from the merchant on his travels; in his tattered bag, he had a whole book's worth.

Eating the fist-sized piece of rye bread in two bites, Col answered shortly, "One *trenni*... and eight *lute*."

The fact that he mumbled the words so reluctantly had nothing to do with the bread in his mouth.

Given his appearance, the memory of paying out a full *trenni* and more must have been desperately frustrating.

"That's quite an investment... Was the traveling peddler you bought them from so impressive-looking?"

It was Ragusa who answered Lawrence's question. "Hardly. Dressed in rags, he was, and with no right arm."

Col looked up and nodded, surprised.

"He's famous around here," said Ragusa. "Walks around selling his papers. I bet he said something like this to you, aye? 'Look at this stump of mine—I've risked this much danger to come by these, but I'm not long for this world. I'm thinking of returning home, so I'll turn these deeds over to you.'"

Col's eyes were glazed over—it must have matched what he'd been told nearly word for word.

Swindlers generally had an apprentice with them, and such lines were passed on from master to apprentice.

As to the matter of the man's missing right arm, it suggested he had once been caught by a constable somewhere, and his arm was taken as punishment.

A thief who stole money forfeited a finger, but a swindler who stole trust—that was an arm. A murderer who took life lost his head. If the crime were especially heinous, hanging was evidently worse than decapitation.

In any case, the boy slumped and looked down, the ignominy of having been fooled by a swindler whose untrustworthiness was well-known adding insult to injury.

"Can you read, though?" Lawrence asked as he flipped through the forgeries.

"A little..." came the uncertain reply.

"More than half of these aren't even forgeries."

"...Wh-what do you mean, sir?"

Lawrence found himself a bit impressed at Col's politeness. Perhaps he had indeed worked for a respectable master once. Lawrence and Col's meeting having been what it was, that was a bit surprising.

Col's expression was one of total defeat; he could hardly have looked any more depressed than he did.

Perhaps feeling sorry for him, Holo—who was sitting next to the boy—offered him some more bread.

"Most of these are documents stolen from some trading firm somewhere. Look here, there are even notices of payment sent," said Lawrence, handing the sheets to Holo—but although Holo could read, she didn't know anything about notices of payment.

She cocked her head, but when she tried to show them to Col, he shook his head.

Perhaps it felt too much like looking upon his own failure.

"If this is the kind of thing you bought, I see them all the time. These papers themselves aren't good for drawing any money, but they're good for getting a laugh among merchants. They were stolen from some trading firm somewhere and have been passed around from one merchant to another since then," said Lawrence.

"One of my customers got tricked by them, too," added Ragusa as he nudged the boat's prow away from a rock in the river.

"Who would steal this?" asked Holo.

"Usually an apprentice at the firm who's gotten tired of being worked too hard—they'll grab them on their way out as a final piece of pay. Rival firms will pay a decent price for the information they contain, and of course, there are swindlers who will buy them up as well. It's advice that gets passed along from one young apprentice to another. If you take money, the company will come after you in earnest. But with something like this, the firm has its reputation to consider, so it's harder for them to pursue."

"Huh?"

"Consider how it would look for a firm to madly chase down a missing copy of its ledger—people would think there was something extraordinary on that ledger, wouldn't they? And that's bad for business."

Holo nodded, impressed by this angle she hadn't considered.

Lawrence flipped through page after page as he talked but seemed to be finding them genuinely interesting.

It wasn't every day that one could easily see which firms had ordered which goods from which shops in which towns.

Col's situation was a sad one, though.

"You know what they say, 'Ignorance is a sin.' What do you say, lad—you've no money anyway, so what say I buy these in exchange for your food and fare?"

The boy's eyebrows twitched in surprise, but he didn't look up, instead staring intently at the inside wall of the boat.

No doubt he was making some calculations in his mind.

There might be something genuine hidden somewhere in that sheaf of paper, or the pages might all be useless, but if he let this opportunity pass he'd never again meet someone willing to trade for them. And yet—he'd paid more than a *trenni* for the lot of them...

Just as Holo often bragged of her ability to see through Lawrence's intentions, Lawrence himself was confident in his ability to figure profit-loss calculations.

Yet unlike Holo, that did not come from an ability to discern people's subtlest shifts in expression, but rather from his long experience as a merchant.

"F-for how much?" asked Col.

As though bearing some grudge, he looked carefully up at Lawrence—perhaps because he felt that if he betrayed any lack of confidence, the price would be beaten down.

His effort was quite charming, and Lawrence had to force himself not to smile at it; he coughed and calmed himself. "Ten *lute*."

"..." Col's face twitched, and he took a deep breath before answering. "Th-that's too low."

"I see. Keep them, then," replied Lawrence immediately, thrusting the sheaf back at Col.

What little vitality Col had mustered drained immediately from his face.

His disappointment showing so clearly made him look more tattered and worn than if he hadn't tried to put on a brave face in the first place.

Col bit his lip as he looked back and forth from the sheaf of papers to Lawrence.

His stubbornness in trying to sell the papers for a bit more had dropped his profits to zero. That same stubborn mask would now be an obstacle if he wanted to ask for anything more.

That was surely what he was thinking.

When he calmed himself a bit, he saw Holo and Ragusa's indulgent smiles and must have realized that it was showing his weakness that would allow him a means of escape.

A merchant will throw away all of his pride if it brings profit.

Of course, Col was not a merchant, and he was yet young.

Lawrence withdrew the sheaf of papers, scratching his chin with the corner of the stack. "Twenty *lute*, then. I can go no higher."

Col's eyes widened, as though his face had just broken through the surface of the water, but he then immediately looked down.

His relief was obvious, and obvious was his desire to hide it.

Lawrence looked at Holo, who bared her fangs at him, as if to say, "Don't tease the boy overmuch."

"I accept your offer…," said Col.

"That's not quite enough to make it all the way to Kerube, though. We'll have to let you off on the way, or else…" Lawrence looked askance at the good-natured boatman who had been enjoying the proceedings thus far.

"Ah, I suppose it's all right," said Ragusa with a laugh, taking Lawrence's meaning. "There'll be odd jobs on along the way. Lend a hand, and I'm sure I can make it worth your time."

Col looked about like a lost puppy, then gave a hesitant nod.

* * *

Toll checkpoints along the river were so common they were a nuisance.

All you needed to collect some money was the ability to stop boat traffic, so it was understandable—but without them, the journey would have been twice as fast.

Even worse, the more affluent landlords could afford to build checkpoints that connected overland roads on either side of the river, which would then become places where boats could load and unload cargo.

Soon people would gather to sell food and drink to the boatmen, and the checkpoint would take on aspects of a roadside inn, and many of them had come to be miniature towns in their own right.

All this slowed river traffic, and there were even times when walking would have been faster.

Ragusa would try to hurry his boat through, but he had nothing on those who were hauling furs.

The fur traders needed to reach Kerube as soon as they possibly could and would throw so much money at the toll collectors that the collectors could hardly complain, and despite the narrow river and Ragusa's skill, his boat was passed by.

"We'll never catch the vixen like this..."

They were stopped at the latest of who knew how many checkpoints, where Ragusa evidently had some appointment he had to keep.

He immediately started talking with a merchant who approached, and calling out to Col, he began moving cargo.

Thus it was that one boat passed them and then another; Holo was leaning against Lawrence as she napped, but her eyes opened, and she watched the boats vaguely and muttered.

Ever since boarding the boat, Holo had been exceedingly sleepy, so Lawrence wondered if she was feeling poorly, but then he remembered how she had cried when he had gone to pick her up from being held as collateral by the Delink Company.

It had been many a year since Lawrence himself had cried, so he had forgotten—crying took a surprising amount of energy.

"Still, it's faster than a wagon," replied Lawrence vaguely as he looked through the papers he had bought from Col.

"I wonder," said Holo.

The rocking boat began to feel like a cradle.

Ocean waves could easily make one sick, but the gentle motion of the river was rather conducive to napping and was far from unpleasant.

"That boy, he's quite earnest."

"Hmm? Oh yes."

Holo was watching Col move cargo on the pier.

Just as she said, Col was following Ragusa's instructions without complaint as he helped in preparing goods for shipment. He couldn't quite manage carrying the large wheat-filled bags from Ragusa's boat, so instead, he carried smaller bags aboard, which seemed to be filled with some sort of legume.

Watching him work now, Lawrence could scarcely imagine that this was the same boy who'd called out "Master" as he clung to a final thread of hope.

Humans were capable of incredible feats when pressed.

"Oh, indeed, to get taken in the way he was, he would have to be earnest."

Given the paltry amount of one *trenni* and eight *lute*, Lawrence imagined Col had been taken for everything he had.

Most people who are swindled were quite earnest, whether greedy or not. They would never imagine that the tale being told to them was a lie.

"I heard somewhere that the more earnest the man, the easier a mark he is." Holo was back in fine form.

Lawrence escaped into his sheaf of papers.

"Heh. So, have you found anything of interest?"

"...A few things, I suppose."

"Hmph. For example?" asked Holo as she casually looked over at the pier, whereupon something seemed to surprise her.

Lawrence followed her gaze and saw a mule loaded so heavily it seemed on the verge of collapse.

Ragusa and Col had been loading wares aboard this traveling merchant's mule.

Its appearance was a bit of an act, but Holo made a face as though she sympathized with the beast.

"For example, here. An order letter for copper coins."

"Copper...coins? Why would you buy money of all things? Are there still others playing at that scheme from before?"

"No, this is just because they need them. They've paid a bit above market price, look. 'Per usual, transport costs and customs duties are the responsibility of the buyer.' This is proof of regular purchases."

"Hmm...wait a moment. I feel as though I remember hearing something. Why would they do that...? I seem to remember..." Holo closed her eyes as wrinkles appeared in her furrowed brow.

Outside of speculation, there were any number of reasons to buy up currency.

But in the case of the low-value copper coins recorded on the sheet, there was only one.

Holo looked up and smiled. "I have it. It's for small change!"

"Oh ho, you've been paying attention."

Holo swelled up and grinned at Lawrence's praise.

"Indeed," Lawrence continued. "These are being specifically imported to be used as change. If someone comes to shop, and you

don't have change ready, you won't do proper business. Travelers constantly take small change out of a city. This coin is probably crossing the channel by way of Kerube. The island kingdom of Winfiel is on the other side of the channel, and it's famously short on currency. That's why currency that circulates this way is called 'rat coin.'"

Holo looked at him blankly.

Something about her face made Lawrence want to poke her nose with his finger.

"When war is imminent or a nation's situation is unstable, travelers and money flow out of the region, like rats fleeing a sinking ship—hence the term."

"I see. Quite an apt phrase."

"Indeed, I'd quite like to meet whoever invented it... hmm?"

As he continued to read the paper in question, Lawrence stopped talking when his eyes fell upon something.

He felt as though he had seen the company's name somewhere.

A short cry came from the direction of the pier as Lawrence tried to remember why the name seemed familiar.

When he looked up, he saw Col about to fall from the edge—but fortunately he avoided drowned rathood as Ragusa grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up; he dangled there like a helpless kitten.

What Lawrence heard next were laughing voices and what he saw was Col's sheepish smile.

He didn't seem a bad sort.

Holo's keen eye for people seemed to have been proven reliable yet again.

"So? What is it?" she asked.

"Hmm? Ah, yes, the company name that's written here... I feel as though I've seen it somewhere. Maybe it was somewhere in these papers."

As Lawrence was leafing through them, the boat suddenly heaved.

Ragusa and Col had finished their labors and returned to the vessel.

"Well done. You're quite the hard worker," said Holo to Col, who had returned to the boat's prow, and his stiff face softened somewhat.

He was probably a quiet lad by nature, but he seemed to have noticed Lawrence flipping through the stack of papers as though looking for something.

Col's face was curious as he watched Lawrence.

"Unfortunately, there's nothing worth money here," said Lawrence without looking up; he sensed the boy flinching.

Holo smiled slightly, punching Lawrence in the shoulder as if to say, "Don't tease him."

Lawrence did understand the boy's hopes, though.

He himself had once been taken in by something similar.

"Ah, here we are."

"Oh?"

Lawrence pulled out a single sheet of paper.

It was still clean, and the writing on it was neat.

It was dated roughly a year earlier and appeared to be a record of the various goods the company had loaded aboard a ship. If there were omissions when the records were entered in the register, they couldn't be amended, so this functioned as a kind of rough draft. Thus the list here would not have differed from what was actually noted in the ledgers, and it included clearly written descriptions of goods, their amounts, and their destinations.

The information networks of companies like these, while not strictly worldwide, brought them reports from distant branch shops and allies, and when added to their proactive gathering of

news from local sources, they were like a mountain of jewels to an independent merchant.

Looking at a list of the goods such a company was sending out to distant locals was like looking into a mirror reflecting the information that company had gathered.

Of course, one had to know how to interpret such knowledge.

"Which is why this has no monetary value."

"Er, um, I mean—" Col had been staring holes into Lawrence's coin purse, but flustered now, he looked away.

Lawrence smiled, then stood and extended his hand. "Here."

Col looked at Lawrence searchingly, then turned his eyes to the paper.

"See? 'Recorded by Ted Reynolds of Jean Company,' it says."

The rocking of the boat made it difficult to read, so despite the cold, Lawrence emerged from under the blanket and sat down next to Col. The boy looked up at Lawrence with trepidation, but his interest seemed to be with the paper.

"What else?" he pressed Lawrence childishly, his eyes a misty blue.

"The destination is an island nation beyond the channel from Kerube, downriver. It's called the kingdom of Winfiel. Oh, also—this is the home of the vixen." These last words were aimed at Holo.

Lawrence could see her ears twitch beneath her hood.

Even if she didn't plan to pursue the woman, Holo seemed not to harbor any warm feelings toward her, either.

"Anyway, this is a memo of a variety of different goods collected in the port of Kerube that will be sold to another company—the name isn't here—in Winfiel. These are the goods. Can you read them?"

To the question of whether or not he could read, Col answered, "A little."

He squinted as though his eyesight was poor, staring intently at the words written on the page.

His mouth seemed glued shut for a time, but at length it opened. "...Wax, glass bottles, books...buckles? Iron plate...er...tin, goldsmithing. And...*ah, nee*—?"

"*Eni*. It's a kind of coin."

"*Eni*?"

"Indeed. You're quite good."

Back when he had been an apprentice, Lawrence had never been happier than when his master praised him and mussed his hair. He recognized that he was not quite as rough as his master had been, so he patted Col's head somewhat more lightly than his master would have.

Col ducked his head in surprise, then smiled bashfully.

"Next to the names of the goods are the amounts and the prices. Unfortunately we can't wave this aloft and expect anyone to give us money for it. It would be a different story if there were evidence of smuggling on it, though."

"There isn't any?"

"Unfortunately not. So long as they don't write, 'These are smuggled goods,' there's no way to tell. Unless they're bringing in something obviously prohibited, that is."

"I see...," said Col with a nod, looking back at the paper. "Er, so then..."

"Yes?"

"What is it about this paper?"

No doubt he wanted to know why Lawrence had gone looking for this one sheet in particular.

"Oh, on another sheet there was a record of a copper coin order, and this was the company that placed the order. Though they're made across the sea, here in Ploania territory, they're a copper coin that's mostly used in Winfiel as small change..."

As Lawrence talked, a strange feeling came over him.

He looked up, then stood.

Opposite him, Holo had been vaguely paging through the sheaf, but she now looked up in surprise. "What is it?"

"Where's the paper from before?"

"Mm. Here it is."

Holo produced a page with a rustling sound, handing it to Lawrence.

Holding the memorandum in his right hand, Lawrence took the order sheet from Holo with his left.

As he looked back and forth between the two, he realized the source of the strange feeling.

The two documents were dated about two months apart. The company was the same.

The copper coins that had been bought up with the sheet in his left hand had been exported on the memo in his right.

"Oh ho. An interesting coincidence, indeed," said Holo, her interest piqued as she peered at the papers Lawrence held; opposite her, Col timidly tried to see for himself.

Since the supposed accomplice-less swindler operated out of this area, then he would have gotten materials from a trading firm somewhere along the Roam River.

By coincidence, he had put together orders and sales from upstream and downstream.

But what gave Lawrence that queer feeling was not the coincidence.

No one was more obsessed with numbers than a merchant.

Only a fortune-teller was equally so.

"But the numbers don't add up," said Lawrence.

"Hmm?" replied Holo. Col leaned in closer—evidently his eyesight really wasn't very good.

"Here it says they bought up fifty-seven chests, but the export was sixty. That's three more."

"...Is there something wrong with that?"

Lawrence laid the two sheets of paper down on the deck and pointed at the relevant spots, but Holo and Col alike only looked mystified.

"Well, I mean...with money, for whoever makes it, the more they make, the more they profit. But because there's so much profit in it, the number of sheets they can issue is strictly limited. If 'money is the root of all evil,' as they say, then that goes double for creating money. The temptation is very strong. So normally, they are very careful to make only just as much as is ordered."

"But they may or may not send everything they have on hand, may they not? If the destination is across the sea and the ship is unsteady, they might have to send less than the usual amount. So they added the remainder there."

It wasn't a bad notion, but to have only three chests left over—it was hard to imagine.

In any case, Lawrence knew that there was more likely to be some kind of mitigating circumstance that explained the discrepancy.

It was natural for a merchant to be suspicious when confronted by a strange phenomenon.

"Well, that may be so, but what it comes down to is a question of belief. I simply believe there is something strange here."

Holo pursed her lips and shrugged. "And what are these chests, then? What do chests have to do with coin counts?"

Lawrence was about to ask Holo if she was joking when he saw Col nod, evidently also confused.

Held between their questioning looks, Lawrence was mildly taken aback—until he realized he had forgotten that a merchant's common sense was not like the rest of the world's.

"Basically, you don't carry a large amount of coins all jangling around in a bag. It takes too long to count."

"Your jokes are clever ones," said Holo lightly, eliciting a smile from Col; their eyes met.

A merchant's wisdom was born of experience.

And much of that wisdom was counterintuitive.

"Suppose you need to transport ten thousand coins. How much time do you think counting those coins will take? If you've moved them all jumbled together in a sack, you have to take them out, pick them up one at a time, then line them up and count them. For one person, it's surely half a day's work."

"So use ten people."

"True. But when it comes to worrying about thieves, it's worse with two people than one, and worse still with three. If just one person is doing the counting, and the count comes out wrong, you need only doubt that one person. But with ten, you'd have to suspect all of them, and you'd need a lookout to watch them for theft. That's no business at all."

"Mm," said Holo with a nod; Col cocked his head curiously.

They seemed not to understand the advantage of a chest. "Furthermore, you might not notice if a sack was to be stolen while in transit."

"But is that not the same for a chest?"

"...Oh! I-I see!" Col's eyes shone as he raised his hand excitedly.

Then he seemed to realize he'd just raised his hand without thinking and hastily lowered it—as though trying to hide a mistake.

Holo tilted her head curiously, but as for Lawrence, seeing the boy's actions came as a surprise.

He acted every bit like a student.

"Are you a student?" he asked.

It would certainly have explained the boy's curiosity, his strangely polite speech, and his surprisingly deep knowledge of things.

Yet Col shrank away at the question. When just a moment ago he had appeared to be finally opening up, that expression disappeared, and he backed away from Lawrence, fear writ large on his face.

Lawrence was dumbfounded—but of course, he knew the reason for this reaction.

He calmed himself and smiled. "I'm but a simple traveling merchant. It's all right, lad."

Col trembled, and Lawrence smiled.

Holo looked back and forth between the two, confused, but seemed to more or less guess at the situation.

"Hmph," she muttered, then approached Col, who couldn't back up any farther lest he find himself in the river. She held her hand out to him.

"My companion is a greedy merchant, but he's also so softhearted I don't know what to do with him. You needn't be afraid."

The same smile had a rather different value when worn by a woman rather than a man.

On top of that, Holo's features were certainly pleasant.

Still frightened, Col tried to squirm away when Holo took hold of his arm, but as she pulled him close, he stopped resisting—in his way, he was just like Holo.

"Heh. Come now, don't cry. All is well."

There was something novel and fresh about seeing Holo so skillfully comfort Col, perhaps because Lawrence always saw her at her most abrasive.

The slender lines of her body seemed if anything to incite the protective instincts of men, but within her body was a wisewolf that had protected a village for centuries—surely a being worthy of being called a god.

Even the great heroes of the area could surely not match her generosity.



"It's just as she says. So, what did you understand?" asked Lawrence. For the nonce, it would be better to demonstrate that he had no interest in the fact that Col was a student and instead talk about something entirely unrelated.

Holo seemed to feel the same way, and she slowly released her grip on his arm as she said something softly.

Though a tinge of his earlier fear remained in his eyes, Col seemed to regain some degree of calm.

It was perhaps out of a sense of male pride that he tried to hide his tears by wiping them away, then looked up. "Y-you're really not...?"

"No. I swear to the gods."

These were the magic words.

Col took a deep breath and sniffed loudly.

For Holo's part, she had a complicated look on her face as she smiled ruefully.

"S-so...you want to know why...the coins are in chests?"

"Yes."

"Is it not because, er...with a chest, the coins can be packed snugly within?"

Holo wrinkled her brow.

"An excellent answer. It's just so. Chests of a set size are chosen and coins packed precisely into them. So long as the chest size or coin thickness doesn't change, the coins will always fit exactly into the chest, and if even a single one is stolen, it will be immediately obvious. Also, you will always know exactly how many coins a given chest holds. There's no need for extra guards nor extra manpower to count coins. It's a better system in every way," said Lawrence, smiling at Col. "Years ago, I would never have conceived of this. Seems you really are an educated lad."

Col straightened in surprise, then smiled sheepishly.

In contrast, Holo looked entirely uninterested. It was difficult

to know whether or not she really hadn't also figured the question out—her kind heart might have led her to keep quiet.

"But if this three-chest discrepancy really does point to something out of the ordinary, that would be interesting," said Lawrence pointedly to Holo, who shrugged as if to say, "I've had it with getting into trouble."

If she was being like this now and if Lawrence was to decide he wanted to chase down Eve, she might well come up with a reason not to.

"Er, uhm—," Col interrupted their wordless exchange.

"Mm?"

"What could be 'out of the ordinary?' Just for example, I mean." Col's bashful smile vanished, replaced with a serious expression.

Lawrence was slightly surprised, and Holo glanced at Col, then met Lawrence's gaze.

"Just for example, eh? Hmm. As proof of illicit coin minting, say."

Col's breath caught in his throat. Illicit minting was a serious crime, indeed.

Lawrence smiled nervously. "That's an example, though—just an example!"

Disappointed, Col slumped.

It was a bit strange—or rather, he didn't seem like someone who had been swindled and just wanted his money back.

Perhaps he needed money.

Perhaps he had borrowed the money he'd used to buy these papers.

The thought occurred to Lawrence as he looked at Holo, who only smiled and shrugged.

Holo might have been able to read people's intentions, but their memories were a mystery even to her.

"It's just that thinking of all the possibilities is a good way to kill time aboard ship, that's all," added Lawrence.

Col nodded regretfully.

The boy had a daring imagination—he'd made a desperate bid in calling Lawrence master just when his counterfeit taxation privilege letter was getting him in trouble on the pier. Yet he had turned out to be a well-behaved boy, save for his strange fixation on money.

And he was a student.

On the way to the Church city of Ruvinheigen, Lawrence had met a shepherdess whose situation piqued his interest; this boy was roughly as interesting.

How had he come to be wandering this area, and what had made him buy this stack of counterfeit documents and ledgers?

Lawrence wanted to get every bit of information out of the boy, but if he pressed too hard, Col's mouth would snap shut like a startled clam. It was an old story—a student descending from drinking and gambling into swindling and finally theft. None were so persecuted by the world as a student who drifted among such pursuits.

Col's fear was surely shaped by his knowing all too well just how cold the world's notice could be.

So Lawrence put on his best merchant's smile and asked, "There are all sorts of students, so what sort are you?"

Half the itinerant "scholars" in the world were only self-proclaimed and hadn't done so much as a speck of real study in their lives. But Col could read, so he seemed not to be one of those.

As Lawrence tap-tapped the papers to put their edges in order, Col's answer was hesitant. "Er... Ch-church... law."

"Oh?" Now this was a surprise.

Studying Church law—did he intend to become a high-ranking priest?

Those who became students or scholars did so either because their family was wealthy and they could afford to or because they

wanted a way to become a member of society without inheriting the family business—or because they simply didn't want to work and instead called themselves scholars.

In any case, students who studied out of a genuine desire to learn were rare.

And among them, those who studied Church law were a special sort indeed.

They didn't want to become monks, but they wished to rise high in the Church ranks.

The field attracted a crafty lot, indeed.

"Were you expelled from school?"

Waiting for Col to answer might well have taken until sundown, so in response to Lawrence's question, Col gave a small nod.

It was the way of such things for students to pool their money and hire a tutor, renting out an inn room or a mansion's guesthouse for taking lectures in—so of course, those who couldn't continue to pay were expelled.

There were stories of saints who would send birds to eavesdrop upon such lessons, then return to recite them—but even miracles had limits.

And Lawrence had heard that most tutors wouldn't so much as answer a question without a gift.

It was a difficult path unless one came from a wealthy family or was a genius at making money.

"So, for a school in this area... Erisol, perhaps?"

"N-no... it was Aquent."

"Aquent?" Lawrence asked, looking up in surprise. Col cowered as though he had been scolded.

Holo's accusing eyes were almost painful.

But the town of Aquent was so far away that Lawrence couldn't help but raise his voice in surprise.

As he watched Holo pat Col's back encouragingly, Lawrence

stroked his beard. "Sorry. It just seemed a bit far, that's all. It'd take quite some time to make the trip on foot."

"...Yes."

"If I remember correctly, Aquent is a place where sages and scholars meet—a place where streams of pure water flow toward the town center, where the apples of wisdom grow year-round; the conversation exchanged there in a single day compares with all the words from four nations, and if you wrote the day's conversations down, they would reach to the bottom of the ocean. Its name is Aquent, a paradise of reason and wisdom."

"It sounds an amazing place! 'Twould be nice to have apples year-round. A paradise indeed!" said Holo, practically licking her chops. Col looked a bit surprised, but soon a faint smile appeared on his face.

Even he could tell when Holo was exaggerating.

"Um, that's actually...not true," he said.

"Hmm? R-really...?" replied Holo, sounding very disappointed, indeed, as she turned to Col.

Perhaps feeling obligated due to the kindness he'd been shown, Col hastily tried to smooth things over. "Er, um, well, but—there are lots of different fruits lined up year-round at the shops. Even lots of rare ones."

"Oh?"

"Like a hairy fruit about this big, that doesn't break even when struck with a hammer—but inside it is a sweet milk."

He was speaking of the coconut.

When the season was right, when the great trading vessels stopped in warm southern ports, sometimes you saw such things—but Holo had certainly never seen one.

And the imagination could run all the wilder if it had no reality with which to anchor itself.

Holo looked at Lawrence.

Her eyes shone with a light that was entirely sincere.

"If we happen to see any, I'll buy you some."

It wasn't honeyed peach preserves, but they would hardly come across coconuts, so Lawrence wasn't worried about keeping this promise.

Of course, if they did find some, then he would be in trouble.

"But really, Aquent isn't a paradise. There's lots of fighting there," interjected Col.

"No doubt the inns are full of thieves. If you sleep alone, your clothes will be gone come morning, and if you go to a pub, it will be filled with brawling. When tempers rise, so too do flames, I'll bet," said Lawrence.

With a mountain of layabout students ranging from Col's age to Lawrence's, it would be like throwing pirates and brigands together in the same room.

Lawrence was being a bit overdramatic, but Col's regretful smile did not deny any of what he said.

A place full of schools would be lively indeed, for good or ill.

"Um, but I did meet some wonderful teachers there, and I learned a lot."

"Indeed, to be able to read so well at your age is impressive."

Col's bashful smile was incredibly charming.

Holo grinned as well.

"So, how did you wind up all the way out here?" Lawrence asked, and Col—still smiling—looked down.

"I tried my hand at the book business..."

"The book business?"

"Yes. My teacher's assistant told me that my teacher was going to write new annotations to a certain book and so I should buy copies of that book before the price rose..."

"And did you?"

"Yes."

Lawrence skillfully kept his face neutral.

When a famous scholar wrote notes on a given book, packages of the book plus the annotations would sell very well indeed.

It was quite common for a scholar and a bookstore to cooperate—the bookstore would buy up copies of an unpopular book, and then the scholar would write annotations for that book.

Scarcity led to escalating prices, which in turn brought greater attention.

Thus it was quite plausible that in towns with schools or universities nearby, talk of such and such a scholar planning to write annotations for such and such a book would be common.

A merchant might easily buy sheepskins or wheat flour a year in advance of selling it, but the publishing business was less reliable than tomorrow's weather, and Lawrence never involved himself in it.

But Col, who had apparently never cast an eye to the avarice and clamor all around him, instead devoting himself to study, hadn't the slightest inkling of the pitfalls of that business.

What Col had invested in wasn't a business at all.

It was a magnificent fraud.

"I knew I didn't have enough money to see my studies through to the end, so I thought I'd try to turn a profit. And the book's price was going up nearly every day, so I knew if I wanted to make any money, I'd have to buy soon. But I didn't have enough, so I borrowed the money from a merchant friend of the assistant."

It was a textbook trap.

The rising price was either a ruse on the part of the bookseller or rumors had gotten out that had led to increased demand.

And as the price began to rise, more and more people would come to believe that the rumors of new annotations were true, which would drive the price up still higher.

After that, it was a great gamble to see who would pull the unlucky number.

If there was someone more foolish, one could sell to them and turn a profit.

But not infrequently, the original buyer was the biggest fool.

Lawrence expected Holo to be rolling her eyes at the tale, but when he glanced at her, she was regarding Col with an expression of deep sympathy—an expression he'd never seen before.

It was not really very funny.

"But for some reason, the teacher didn't write the annotations, and...the book turned really cheap," Col finished with an embarrassed smile, and with the story turning out exactly as Lawrence guessed, he understood.

Col had stumbled into a trap and even borrowed money to buy books.

Obviously he could no longer pay his tuition, to say nothing of eating or repaying the debt—so he had beat a hasty retreat.

He might have wound up in a northern town like this because the connections between students were stronger than any clumsy merchant's. There were so many shiftless scholars in this area that it was easy to keep track of who was in which town.

Most of the schools and scholars were in the south, but in a big enough city, there were people who would try to gain learning for free from the street-corner preachers. When Lawrence and Holo had been in Ruvinheigen, groups of young men looking roughly like Col would gather to listen.

But once Lawrence and Holo arrived in this region, such groups disappeared.

It was cold, after all, and passing the winter was difficult.

"So then I, er, I started traveling about, looking for charity, and I wound up around here. I heard in the winter a lot of people come through here, so there would be a lot of work."

"Ah, the winter campaigns, eh?"

"Yes."

"I see."

But as Col fled from the debt collectors and actually headed north, the winter campaigns had been canceled and there was no work at all. To survive through the winter at this rate would take what little money he had on hand.

That was when the mysterious swindler had appeared.

Though Col had tried to study Church law, it seemed God's treatment of him had only ever been cold.

Or perhaps this was a test from God.

"And so after all these twists and turns, you came to our boat," said Holo.

"Y-yes, it seems so."

"'Tis quite an amazing encounter. Wouldn't you say?" Turning to Lawrence, Holo smiled.

Col's grime-smeared cheeks reddened.

"Though it can't be said to have been a fortunate trip, it's come together in the end. The world is indeed full of malice, but there are some pitfalls one can avoid so long as one knows of them—ignorance is a sin, after all. But you needn't worry anymore," said Holo proudly. Had her hood been pulled back, her ears would surely have been twitching.

Had the maternal-seeming calm she had possessed a moment ago gone elsewhere?

No, wait, thought Lawrence.

He realized that Holo was like this because despite having said such brave things as she extended a helping hand to Col, she did not intend to shoulder that responsibility herself.

"Ignorance is... a sin?"

"Quite. But you needn't worry. After all, my companion's weathered all manner of adversity to become a full-fledged marshman... mmph...!"

As he glared at Holo through narrowed eyes, Lawrence put his hand over Holo's big mouth.

After she stopped mumbling, he could tell she was trying to bite him, so he pulled his hand away.

"Perhaps you'd like to teach him with all the knowledge and experience you've acquired?" said Lawrence.

"Hmm? You surely do say the strangest things, sir. Despite my being but a girl of tender years, are you saying that your knowledge and experience would be inferior to my own?"

"Urgh—"

Owing to the necessity of hiding her true nature, Lawrence could say nothing at all to refute Holo, but Holo could speak as she wished.

Col was dumbstruck as he looked at the two of them.

Holo's red-tinged eyes seemed to be smiling, but she made no move to back down.

While she had blithely extended the boy her sympathy, it was Lawrence who would be in a bad position if he was forced to play mentor—as though he knew what troubles could be avoided if one was given enough knowledge from another. What Col truly needed to learn was not where the pitfalls were, but rather how to search for them in the first place.

It was not something easily taught in a day.

Holo know that all too well.

And yet she was hounding Lawrence to do it anyway.

"Why was it that you took such good care of me, eh?" Holo grabbed his earlobe and whispered the words into his ear. "Was it because I was so lovely? Are you such a shallow male?"

"That—"

That hadn't been the only reason, but it had certainly been part of it.

If he refused to lend wisdom and aid to Col now, he would have no grounds on which to refute the accusation.

Holo's gaze pierced him.

"Fine—fine! Now get off," said Lawrence. It would be no joke at all if she stretched his earlobe out longer on that side.

Holo finally released him. "Quite. That's my companion all right," she said with a pleased smile, flicking his ear.

Lawrence wanted to get her back, but there was no telling how much rage he would incur if he was to do so. "So does the boy in question actually want to learn?"

He turned his gaze to the dumbfounded Col.

The puppy-like Col could surely tell who was master of whom, just as a real dog could.

Though he gaped for a moment at the sudden question put to him, he was in the end a smart lad.

Col straightened his posture and took a breath. "I-I would be honored to accept your instruction."

Holo nodded, satisfied.

Of course, she wasn't the one doing the teaching.

Lawrence scratched his head and sighed.

While he did enjoy teaching, he wasn't comfortable with all its attendant formalities.

But he couldn't let that stop him.

After all, it hadn't only been Holo's fetching form that had led him to pick her up and bring her along with him.

"I guess it can't be helped, then. Now you're really on board with us."

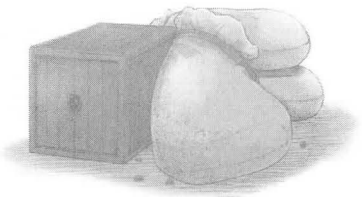
Just as Lawrence said so, the boat rocked lightly.

Col reddened, and Holo gave an exaggerated sigh.

Just as Lawrence was regretting having said such, Holo spoke.

"You needn't worry. That is what I love about you."

CHAPTER THREE



In instructing the apparently easily deceived Col, Lawrence knew that if he tried to show examples of every possible swindle or scam, there would be no end to it.

What he needed to teach was a frame of mind that would help Col avoid being tricked.

After that, once Col knew one or two ways of making money, he would probably be able to save some up so long as he didn't succumb to greed.

Of course, overcoming greed was one of the most difficult things for humans to do.

"When someone tells you of a fine opportunity, you need to think about how they will profit from it. Or don't just consider the circumstances that will bring you gain—consider how you stand to lose, as well. Most scams can be avoided by simply doing that much."

"But don't things sometimes go well and sometimes not?"

"Of course. But when you're being swindled, the profit is generally too good. When the balance between the profit and loss is strange, it's better to get out. So if the gain is great or the loss is too large, don't do it."

"Even if the gain... is great?" Just as would be expected from someone who wanted to learn badly enough to pay for it, Col was dedicated and clever.

Though Lawrence had been reluctant to take him on, the boy was quick enough on the uptake that teaching him was enjoyable.

"You don't seem like you quite believe it," said Lawrence.

"Er, well... not really."

"In life, it's better to assume that bad things will happen to you rather than good things. You can't look at someone else's success and assume that it will happen to you. There are a lot of people in the world, so it makes sense that one or two of them are going to be fortunate. But there's only one of you. Assuming that good fortune will come to you is no different than pointing a finger at a random person and predicting the same for them. But do you think that prediction would come true?"

As he repeated to another person the words his own master had spoken to him, Lawrence felt their weight.

If only he had been able to put them into practice a bit more faithfully, his own travels with Holo might have gone somewhat more smoothly.

"So keeping all that in mind, if we return to the documents you were tricked into buying..."

Holo lazily watched their exchange.

At first it seemed as though she was about to make fun of Lawrence's slightly pompous lecturing, but eventually she seemed to simply be enjoying the conversation.

The boat headed easily downriver, and though it was chilly, there was no wind.

The mood was strangely stable, unlike when Lawrence had traveled alone, but also unlike his travels with just Holo. Whatever it was fit the situation perfectly; it was a queer and ancient sensation.

As Lawrence taught, he wondered what the feeling was.

Holo wasn't beside him sniggering maliciously, but when he turned around, there she was behind him, a soft smile on her face.

They were on a river in the middle of winter, so what was this warmth?

Lawrence didn't know. He didn't know, but it made his body feel light.

Conversation with Col became smooth, and as Col began to understand Lawrence's thinking, Lawrence started to understand Col's questions.

Good fortune might not often come his way, but fortunate encounters seemed to be quite common.

It was that kind of moment.

"Ha-ha. Am I interrupting anything?" came Ragusa's voice suddenly, and Lawrence felt as though he'd been woken from a dream.

Col seemed similarly jolted, and as he regained his composure, his expression made him look as though he wasn't quite sure of what he was doing.

"Er, not at all... Is something the matter?"

"Only that the next checkpoint will be the last for the day. I thought you might have something you need to buy, that's all."

"Ah, I see." Lawrence exchanged a look with Holo. She checked the contents of the bag that held their food provisions—even sharing bread with Col, they would have plenty.

"'Twill last," she said.

"Apparently it will last," said Lawrence to Ragusa.

"Aye, and 'tis well if so. Still—" Ragusa stretched, then leaned on the pile of cargo, a broad smile on his face. "Seems a lie has become truth. He's playing the apprentice quite well!"

Ragusa was obviously referring to Col, who looked down in embarrassment.

Unlike a certain someone whose chest puffed out at the slightest praise.

"I've hired boys many times before, but they rarely stay even a year. And when it comes to working without being yelled at or whipped, why—this lad's a miracle!" Ragusa smiled.

"Doubtless," Lawrence agreed.

Wandering scholars were despised—they were shiftless, yes, but they also did no work and accomplished nothing to gain any sort of trust.

Though he had been cornered into it, Col worked hard to earn his way and took Lawrence's teachings to heart—more than enough to earn trust.

Blinking his eyes rapidly at the unexpected praise, Col appeared not to understand that.

Holo smiled, happiest of all.

"So I've some odd jobs to take care of at the next checkpoint."

"Ah, yes—please let me help."

"Ha-ha-ha! Careful, you'll be scolded by your teacher!"

"Eh?" said Col, confused, at which Lawrence smiled helplessly and spoke.

"He doesn't want to be either a merchant or a boatman, this lad. Isn't that right?"

Col looked up with his pale blue eyes, returning Lawrence's gaze, then Ragusa's; then he stopped.

It was clear he was thinking with all his might.

"...Yes. Er, I-I want to study Church law."

"Well now, isn't that a shame."

"So you see how it is," said Lawrence.

"I reckon I'll give up, then, if nobody else is going to get him all to themselves. Suppose it's always the gods that profit in the end, eh?" Ragusa sighed good-naturedly, then moved astern and picked up his pole.

Reliable people were always in demand, no matter the industry.

"Um...?"

Lawrence chuckled. "He's just saying that if you keep studying like this, you'll wind up a scholar eventually."

"Ah..." Col nodded uncertainly, and as the boat drew near to the dock, Col hurried over to Ragusa when the man called for him.

Lawrence was left to ruminate over Ragusa's words.

It did seem to be the gods who profited in the end.

"You seem regretful," said Holo.

"Huh?" Lawrence said, then nodded. "Oh yes, I suppose I did feel a bit disappointed."

"Still, you'll have other chances."

Lawrence looked back at Holo, a little surprised at her words. "So you find just helping me become a merchant of note unsatisfying?"

"You're not full-fledged until you have an apprentice."

So it was about the apprentice, then?

It was true that Lawrence had told Holo that he felt as though his adventures might be over once he opened a shop.

Holo had told him to get an apprentice.

"It's a bit early for that, though."

"Is it?"

"It is. Maybe ten years from now. Or fifteen even."

A few years earlier, Lawrence would never have been able to think ten years hence, but he was reaching the age where he would now be looking that far ahead.

In the past, he might well have thought he could be anything, but now those choices were no longer open to him.

"Ten years from now, you say—mm, by then even you may be a bit more manly."

"...What are you talking about?"

"Oh, shall I explain?" Judging by her smile, Holo was hiding something big.

Deciding it was better to let sleeping gods lie, Lawrence gave up his counterattack.

"Heh. Smart of you."

"Your praise flatters me, milady."

Holo smacked Lawrence's shoulder, her cheeks deliberately puffed out.

Lawrence smiled in reply, then reached out for the sheaf of papers he had bought from Col.

Despite the interruption, the issue of the copper coins was enough to arouse his merchant's curiosity.

Though Lawrence wasn't particularly thinking of profit—much less trying to expose the Jean Company's smuggling—the notion that he would be able to solve the riddle simply through careful analysis of this sheaf of paper was exciting.

"You surely are a stingy male."

"What?"

"Look at the way your eyes light up at that paper. Is it so much more fun than keeping my company?"

Lawrence didn't know if he should laugh or not.

He knew for a certainty, though, that if he pointed out that Holo was being jealous of a stack of papers, he'd be hit.

"It's only a difference of three chests. Why is that so interesting?" Holo asked.

"Why...? I suppose because it's fun to think about. But this time if I'm mistaken, we won't get dragged into some kind of uprising. You needn't worry on that count."

Lawrence flipped through the pages as he talked and soon came upon a sheet on which the Jean Company's name was written and then another.

Perhaps this was what he was looking for.

"..."

He got the feeling Holo had said something and looked up.

Holo had plopped down and was grabbing onto the blanket.

Beneath her robe, her tail swished discontentedly.

Her expression was one of frustration.

"You're very skilled at bargaining sometimes, you know," she said.

Occasionally even Holo was easy to understand.

Was he being presumptuous, Lawrence wondered, in imagining that what Holo was thinking was, *It's all well and good for you to attend to Col, but when he's gone, your attention should be only on me*?

"Well then, would you like to help?"

"...I suppose I would not mind."

Lawrence was reminded of long ago, when Holo couldn't bring herself to simply ask for an apple.

Her face had been displeased then, even as her ears had flicked up happily.

"This word, here. *Jean Company.* Find anything that mentions it. You can read the letters, right?"

"Aye. Anything that mentions it, anything at all?"

"Yes."

Col's bundle of papers was actually quite sizable.

Many of them were badly wrinkled, perhaps having been handled roughly or stuffed into a bag in the process of their theft.

And as proof they had passed through many hands, many were badly smudged and worn out with finger marks.

There were probably a hundred sheets in total; Lawrence handed a section to Holo, and they began to search for the Jean Company.

Lawrence could tell at a glance what sort of document each sheet was, and once he knew the document type, he knew more or less where on the page to look for company names.

By contrast, Holo had to scan each page from top to bottom or she risked missing the name—and the writing was often messy.

It was obvious to Lawrence that she frequently gave him nervous glances.

No doubt she found it frustrating being less capable than him at something.

Lawrence pretended not to notice and slowed his pace.

"Still, you—," began Holo.

"Hmm?"

Even having slowed his pace, Lawrence was faster, so it was farfetched to think that Holo suspected him of self-sabotage after only a moment.

In fact, rather than continuing to work as she spoke, Holo set the papers down and stared someplace far in the distance.

"What's wrong?"

Holo shook her head in response to Lawrence's question, looking down at her hands. "...It is nothing."

Yet even Holo, who was a brilliant liar, could not plausibly insist that it was, in fact, nothing.

"You could be a little more subtle, you know."

Lawrence expected that would anger her a bit, but Holo seemed to be a cut above that.

She smiled self-derisively, then took up the papers to put them in order. "I am just thinking about tiresome things, that is all."

Finally turning a page over with a flip, Holo slowly closed her eyes.

"What kinds of things?"

"Truly tiresome things...I was wondering what sort of town awaits us once we have made our way down the river."

At Holo's words, Lawrence looked downriver.

No sign of the sea was yet visible; there were only the flat plains and the gentle flow of the river.

Of course, the port town of Kerube was not yet visible, either.

But Lawrence got the feeling that Holo's statement carried another meaning.

More than anything, when Holo called something "tiresome," it was not just that it was simply boring.

"I've only passed through it by boat two or three times, so I haven't gotten a proper look at it, if I'm honest."

"That is enough. What sort of town is it?"

Since she had asked, there was no reason to hide it. Lawrence called up the memories of his past experiences. "The river meets the sea in a wide delta, and where townspeople do not live, it is lively indeed, with taverns and trading companies' loading docks and money changers' counters. Homes are located on the northern and southern edges of the delta. Collectively it's known as Kerube, but the upper, middle, and lower sections do not get along well at all."

"Oh ho." Holo looked down at the paper in her hands, though it was not clear whether she was reading the letters there or not.

"I visited it from a large trading ship that connects distant nations. It had stopped in Kerube to take on supplies midway through the voyage. Since it was a large ship, it couldn't navigate the shallow delta, so we boarded a smaller boat to make the trip."

Lawrence stopped there to check Holo's reaction.

If this was what she wanted to know, it would have been faster to simply let her see the place when they arrived—but Holo did not seem to think so.

"And then what did you see once you went up the delta?" Holo was looking vaguely at the paper in her hand, but her focus seemed to be on a point far beyond it.

Seeing her like that and explaining the sights of Kerube to her in this way, Lawrence felt like he was leading a blind person.

But when he slowed his speech, Holo looked at him and wordlessly pressed him for more.

Lawrence was concerned, but continued. "...Right. Going up the delta, the first thing that greets us is the wind- and tide-bleached wreckage of a ship that's run aground. The hull is broken cleanly in two, and we pass through it like it's a gate. Once on the other side, we're surrounded by energy and noise, but not like in a town market. A town market sells goods one at a time, but here goods are bought and sold in amounts that would make your head spin—it's a market for merchants. The goods piled high there will be taken to lands near and far. Let's see...ah, yes. There are many shops dedicated to providing a brief moment of pleasure in the long and difficult voyages. Inside them, well...it would probably make your brow wrinkle to hear of it," said Lawrence with a deliberate shrug, at which Holo guffawed.

"From within the rows of two-story buildings come the constant sounds of laughter and lute music all day long."

Holo nodded, and without raising either her head or her gaze, she asked, "Where was the ship going?"

"The ship?"

"The one you were riding on."

"Ah, that ship was bound far south along the coast, arriving at a port town called Yordos, a place known for its skilled artisans. The ship was carrying mostly amber from the north, and the town was famous for its amber craft. It's even farther south than Pazzio, where you and I wound up running around underground, or even Pasloe, where we met. The sea is very warm there and dark."

Lawrence had been younger and more carefree then; he had owned no wagon and had been rather careless with his life as he flitted from place to place.

It didn't enter the conversation, but there was no comparison between a long sea voyage spent in a dim room below decks and a short riverboat trip.

On the voyage, he had held desperately onto the cow bladder

that contained his drinking water, trying not to spill it as the boat rocked so violently that it had been impossible to even sit properly.

And with that much rocking, a poor traveling merchant—who was hardly a sailor—would soon fall prey to seasickness.

When there was nothing left in his stomach, he had vomited blood, and he had been thin and haggard by the time the boat arrived.

It was bad enough that Lawrence could scarcely believe he'd made the journey three times.

"Mm. Though I do not know this 'amber' of which you speak."

"Huh? You don't?" asked Lawrence, and Holo shot him an irritated glance.

He would have guessed that living the life of a forest god, it would be the kind of thing she would know—but then, she hadn't known about pyrite, either.

"It's tree sap that's hardened underground, and it looks just like a jewel. It's rather like...ah, yes. It looks a bit like your eyes actually."

Lawrence pointed at Holo's face, whereupon she seemed to unconsciously try to look at her own eyes. He couldn't help but laugh when she went cross-eyed.

"You did that on purpose," she said—but if that had truly been so, Holo would not have said it.

Since Lawrence could tell that she was irritated at his remark, he answered, "Well, in any case, they're like beautiful jewels."

Despite her irritation, Holo couldn't help but burst into laughter at the obvious words. "Hmph! Not bad, for you. So after you got off that ship, where did you go next?"

"Next? Next was...," began Lawrence, when a question appeared in his mind.

What could she be getting at by asking him this all of a sudden?



"You can tell me that, or you can tell me where that vixen's destination is."

Perhaps Holo thought Lawrence's hesitation was due to the vagueness of his memory.

But no—he soon realized that was not it.

It was because she was afraid of even a moment of silence—even the amount of time it took him to wonder why she was asking all this.

"Eve's destination, eh? If she's going to sell the fur to fur craftsmen, it'll be still farther south than Yordos. Probably a town named Urva."

"How much do you think she'll make?"

"Hmm... Perhaps triple... though that might be tough. If she were to turn that much profit, she'd never speak to a traveling merchant like me again, I'd wager."

At Lawrence's smile, Holo smacked him on the shoulder, her face displeased.

But their eyes did not meet.

It was as though if she looked him in the eye, she was afraid he would see her mind.

"Ha-ha. But that's no joke—if she turns a profit of one or two thousand gold pieces, she'll be launched into the ranks of high-level merchants. Once you've got that kind of money, the done thing is to hire help, open a shop, buy a ship, and get involved in long-distance trading. Buy gold from desert nations and spices from scorching lands. Then bring back silk or glasswares, volumes of ancient writing that detail the history of bygone empires, exotic foods and animals, mountains of sea jewels like pearls or coral. A ship full of such things returning safely to port could bring a profit ten or twenty times what I'll make in my life. Then you can open branch offices for your trading company and most likely get into banking transactions. Loaning huge sums to local nobility in ex-

change for various special privileges allows you to seize control of the local economy. Then you finally become the official merchant for the southern emperor. You handle the ordering of the king's coronation crown, which could be worth two or three hundred thousand *lumione*. Once you're a merchant of that magnitude, you can send any sort of good anywhere to any nation from your seat, and you're received like a king anywhere you go. Your throne of gold coins is complete."

It was the path of gold every merchant had dreamed of at least once.

What made this absurd was the number of merchants who followed that path, only to have it end in martial rule.

Yet the merchants who used force on the way toward martial rule were so many that even an omnipotent god could hardly count them.

Even if Eve gained some inkling of this, there was no telling if things would go well for her.

To gain the huge profits that could be had via long-distance trade, the vessel had to arrive safely in port—and that was no mean feat.

Lawrence could not count on both hands the number of merchants he personally knew who had seen their entire fortunes literally vanish beneath the waves.

"'Tis like a path of gold leading to a nation of gold," said Holo, amused. It was not clear to what extent she realized Lawrence's story was fantastical, but from her tone, it seemed clear she understood it to be a fantasy. "Still, it does not seem that it would be so very frustrating to let the entrance to that path pass you by."

Lawrence naturally nodded at her words.

It wasn't especially frustrating.

After all, the path Lawrence wished to tread was not the path of gold.

But he couldn't help feeling that if Holo was with him, he could walk it.

Surely he could arrive at that mountain of jewels, along the path of avarice that swirled with trickery and wiles, undeceived by devils and unharmed by evil gods, pushing forward at every chance.

It would be an adventure tale worthy of the term and worthy, too, of being passed down through the centuries.

He and Holo would contest a gold transaction with a powerful merchant as their rival and bargain with the royal family of an ancient nation over purebred sheep. They might cross swords with a pirate armada or be betrayed by a trusted underling.

Lawrence wondered how much fun such adventures would be with Holo by his side.

And yet for some reason, he got the feeling that Holo wanted no part of this.

So he asked.

"Do you not wish to walk that path?"

Looking disinterested, Holo did indeed nod. "I will have to pass on your tales. 'Twould be better if such tales were fewer."

Lawrence chuckled soundlessly at her obstinacy, earning him a glare from Holo.

She was surely lying, to claim that she wished for tales to be few. What she wanted to be few were people who would tell those tales. For example, if Lawrence saw someone triumphantly talking about Holo's sleeping form, he would certainly bear said person ill will.

"Rather than talk of the path of gold, I would sooner hear of what's beyond this amber village."

Instead of tales of wild adventure, she wanted tales of a journey like the one they'd had so far.

As to why she wanted to hear something like that, the reason was obvious.

The sensation he had felt while describing the delta of Kerube—when it was put into words, he understood it immediately.

But Lawrence only shut his mouth and smiled faintly, and without saying anything else, he answered Holo's question as it was asked.

At the amber village, he would sell animal bones and teeth acquired in the north and buy up salt and salted herring before heading inland. He would go on foot, by wagon, even occasionally traveling with a caravan. He would walk plains, cross rivers, hike mountains, and wander forests. There would be injuries and sickness. Lawrence would rejoice at meeting a merchant he had heard was dead and laugh at hearing rumors of his own demise.

Holo listened to the story happily, asking her questions quietly, as if she enjoyed hearing about the vast stretches of land she had not yet seen, despite her centuries. As if surprised at the frequency of amusing incidents.

And as if imagining herself along for the journey, as a matter of course, not worthy of any particular mention.

At length, Lawrence would make his way deep into the mountains and trade salt there for marten fur—but he stopped the tale before that. Telling any further, he felt, would be a breach of the unspoken promise that they shared.

For Holo's part, she had leaned idly against him and held his hand in her own.

The journey that Lawrence described would take two years in reality.

Perhaps the fatigue from the long journey the two had undertaken had finally reared its head.

That long journey that would never be realized.

After exchanging salt for marten fur in the mountain village, if Lawrence was to continue the tale, which village would be next?

The great wheat fields. The port town. If Lawrence was to continue, the circle of the journey would be closed, and it would continue forever.

But Holo did not press him further.

She knew that if she was to speak, to press him on, this strangely dreamlike atmosphere would be destroyed.

Lawrence wondered if Holo was regretting the trip. Or could she be reflecting on how much fun it had been?

For Lawrence it was both. He had regrets because it had been such fun.

Their travel would go no farther south than Kerube. Neither would they head west. What lay beyond that was a vast unknown world. Though it did indeed exist should they choose to set foot there, it was a world they would never enter.

"In the beginning was the word," said God.

And if the world had been created by those words—

Was Holo, who was known to some as a god, borrowing Lawrence's words to create a temporary world of her own?

Lawrence, naturally, did not ask her what she hoped to accomplish by doing so.

Holo had spent hundreds of years in the wheat fields by herself. She was well used to playing in a made-up world.

But looking at the dazed Holo, who sat there motionless, Lawrence couldn't help wondering if she would really be all right on her own after their journey was over.

According to the book in the village of Tereo, Holo's homeland had been destroyed.

It would be fortunate if after so much time, the old inhabitants of the place had returned.

But what if they hadn't?

This worried Lawrence.

When he imagined Holo, listless and alone in the moonlight of

the cold, quiet mountains, it didn't seem possible that she could get by on her own.

No doubt she would feel like howling from time to time, but none were there who would answer.

But if he voiced any of these thoughts, Lawrence knew her anger would be like a raging fire, and it was obvious that she would admit none of it. And what she had to recognize above all else was that no matter how hard Lawrence might try, her loneliness would never be eased.

It would be a lie to say Lawrence did not feel powerless.

Yet he had considered all this when he had gone to collect Holo at the Delink Company.

He spoke with forced cheer; it was the least he could do. "So, what say you? Not an especially exciting journey, is it?"

Holo gave Lawrence a listless look and fixed it upon him for a time.

When she finally smiled, it may have been because she had spotted something stuck on Lawrence's face.

She sat up with exaggerated effort and spoke as though it was a great burden. "...Right you are. Still—"

"Still?"

The expression Holo made as she looked doubtfully over her shoulder might well have been a specialty of hers. "As it's such an ordinary journey, we can travel at a leisurely pace, hand in hand, without an excess of suspense."

A malicious smile.

But it wasn't Holo whose smile was malicious.

It was God up in his heaven whose intent was ill.

Before Lawrence could say anything, the expression on Holo's face disappeared, as though she had simply been enjoying a mild diversion. She turned over a page and voiced a slight exclamation. As she proudly took the paper in hand and showed it to Lawrence, there wasn't so much as a hint of the emotion from a moment ago.

A mere human like Lawrence could hardly manage such a feat.

And being a mere human, it took Lawrence a moment to regain his own composure.

Holo smiled indulgently and waited.

This was, in truth, an ordinary journey.

And peaceful, as well; Holo was close enough that he could reach out and touch her any time he wanted.

"This is indeed from the Jean Company. It's a memo of their exports from last summer."

"Hn." Holo sniffed. Lawrence couldn't help but smile at her proud manner, as though she'd discovered a treasure map.

He just couldn't match her.

"And yes, it looks like they exported sixteen chests. So this...no...is it...?"

As Lawrence compared the paper to other export lists, he was soon submerged in thought.

A fragile bubble of a dream rose within his mind; he wanted to seal it away in the deepest corner.

It was too sweet a dream.

Lawrence was not so naive as to be ignorant of the word *corruption*.

"Well, hurry and look for more papers," said Holo, suddenly irritated, grabbing Lawrence's ear and hauling him forcibly out of the well of his own thoughts.

Surprised, Lawrence held his ear, and looked at Holo's profile as she dropped her gaze to the paper she held. Suddenly he remembered something—that she had volunteered to help him look for the company's name in the sheaf of papers because she wanted him to pay attention to her.

But thanks to her rigid expression of rejection, he couldn't bring himself to say, "Let's puzzle this out together."

It was strange that what was once such a tender mood could become like this so quickly.

Holo's mood changed more quickly than the mountain weather.

Was he just slow? Lawrence wondered, but then he told himself that this was just the caprice of a maiden's heart.

Though it was entirely unclear whether she was in fact a maiden, he silently added.

"Is this all of them?" Holo asked, having finished looking through the papers. In the end, she had found two of note.

Combined with what Lawrence had found, there were seven sheets in total.

As long as it wasn't an especially sloppy company, similar documents would be left in similar locations. Whoever had stolen these papers from the company would have just grabbed whatever they could grab, without looking carefully at the contents.

Just as Lawrence had guessed, there was an order sheet and a memorandum for the previous year's summer and another order sheet for the winter of the year before that.

And each time, they ordered fifty-seven chests from the copper suppliers and sent sixty chests of copper coin to the kingdom of Winfiel.

Since Winfiel would hardly be importing used, worn-out coins, each chest would have contained newly minted currency.

Those three extra chests were coming from somewhere—but there were no papers that said where.

"It doesn't seem as though there was anything decisive here."

"Not really. But even if the Jean Company's name isn't on them, there may be some related documents in here."

"Oh ho. Well, shall we?"

"Still, this may be proof that they really are illegally minting currency," Lawrence murmured to himself, an impatient Holo by his side.

Minting a large amount would be easily noticed, but if it was just a bit, the company might get away with it.

Alternatively, they might be experimenting with copper as a prelude to illegally producing gold coins.

The possibilities mounted in Lawrence's imagination—he thought of what information he would need to prove each scenario and what information he lacked. It was just as he was wondering if there was a different way to think about it entirely that he realized Holo, still next to him, was obviously bored.

"..." Holo cocked her head to crack her neck audibly, an expression of ill humor on her face. "Are you truly not going to chase after that vixen?"

If so, you'll never hear the end of it, she meant.

"...If you've any thoughts, you should share them," said Lawrence.

Holo raised her eyebrows, then with an exasperated expression rested her elbow on her knee and cupped her chin in her hand. She looked like a gambler frustrated at a dice roll gone badly.

Lawrence's roll had not been a good one, it seemed.

"Aye, so long as they have something to do with huge profits for you."

"...And you just said you didn't want that. And also—"

"Hmm?"

"You don't mind using your head, do you? It's a way to kill time," said Lawrence.

Holo's eyes widened enough to surprise Lawrence, and she snapped her mouth shut as though she'd been about to say something. She closed her eyes, folded the paper sheaf she held shut, then grasped the edges of her hood and drew it over her face.

"Wh-what is it?" Lawrence asked in spite of himself.

Her ears and tail flicked around noisily. When she brought her hands down from her hood, her eyes blazed with anger.

As those still, unwavering eyes looked at him, Lawrence couldn't help but verbally retreat. "... Wh-why are you so angry?"

Her normally amber eyes seemed more like red-hot iron. "Angry? Angry, did you say?"

Just when Lawrence realized he had well and truly roused her anger, the vigor drained from her bristling fur as quickly as it had arrived.

It was as though a too-full water skin had popped.

Holo looked at him with ghostlike eyes, now so dispirited that it seemed she had been worn out in but a moment. "You... you would hardly understand why I would say this, anyway."

Holo gave him a sidelong glance and sighed audibly.

She was like a master who'd lost the energy to be angry with a particularly incompetent apprentice.

And yet Lawrence had a thought.

She's saying these things because she's bored and wants me to pay attention to her, he thought.

He said nothing, though—not because he was afraid that saying so would make her still angrier, but rather because Holo had already seen right through him and bared her fangs in warning. "You'd do well to mind your words."

When Lawrence had entered his apprenticeship under a master, the thing he hated more than all else was being asked questions.

If he answered wrong, he was cuffed, and silence earned him a kick.

Evidently Lawrence's thinking was wrong.

Which meant the only alternative was silence.

"You truly do not understand?"

Lawrence sifted through his memories.

He straightened despite himself and averted his gaze.

"'Tis all right if you don't."

At the unexpected words, Lawrence turned back to her. At that

point, Holo added with a serious face, "But I won't speak to you until you do."

"Wha—?" Before Lawrence could even begin to ask why she would do something so childish, Holo moved away from him, snatching up the blanket that they shared and wrapping it around herself.

Lawrence was dumbfounded.

He very nearly asked her if she was joking, but stopped himself at the last moment. Holo was as stubborn as a child. If she said she wouldn't speak to him, then she wouldn't speak to him.

However, this was still better than being suddenly ignored. She had gone to the trouble of declaring her intent, a high-level tactic.

Engaging her over her childishly inflammatory words would be unseemly, and ignoring her in retaliation would be even more immature. And having been visibly disturbed by her declaration that she would no longer speak to him, he could hardly regain control.

Looking down at the papers in his hand, Lawrence sighed. He had thought that puzzling over this mystery would be amusing enough, but it seemed not to be to Holo's liking. She'd been happy enough to sift through the papers with him, so what was so upsetting about thinking through the various possibilities?

For Lawrence's part, he imagined that turning the various pointless things over in their minds would be the more fun part. At the very least, Lawrence would learn a thing or two, thanks to Holo's first-rate mind.

Or perhaps she'd simply learned that ill-conceived thinking led to getting involved in dangerous business.

Lawrence didn't understand Holo's mind.

He placed the Jean Company paperwork atop the other papers as a prelude to tidying up.

Holo didn't so much as glance at him. Even for a merchant, skilled as a matter of course in understanding the moods of oth-

ers, Holo was no ordinary challenge. Terrible punishment awaited any misstep.

As Lawrence was thinking it over, Holo suddenly looked up.

Though she had moved away from him, the boat's deck was not large. Lawrence soon noticed and followed her gaze.

She was looking downriver.

Just as he wondered if she was concerned about a boat that was heading downriver ahead of them, he heard a *plop-plop* sound, as though something was spilling.

He realized it was actually a horse's galloping footfalls just as that same horse came into view, flying like an arrow along the road that ran alongside the river, and bound upriver.

"What's this?" Lawrence murmured, and when there was no reply from Holo, he looked over in her direction, only to remember that she wasn't speaking to him.

It was like a conditioned response.

He had planned to pass it off as merely talking to himself, but there was just no way to hide it.

No doubt he'd be mocked for this later.

Thinking about it was depressing, but when he thought about having been unable to solve the problem, it was a bit frightening.

Holo emerged from the blanket, without paying Lawrence the slightest heed, and lightly stepped up onto the dock the boat had moored at.

The horse's gallop slowed as it approached the dock, and just before the animal stopped, its rider dismounted. The man wore a mantle wrapped around his shoulders, and from his clothes, a single look made it obvious he was a boatman. He seemed to know Ragusa, as Ragusa and Col walked up the dock onto land to greet the man. Without exchanging any pleasantries, Ragusa and the newcomer were soon asking questions and engaging in conversation.

Col had no way to include himself, so perhaps trying to keep out of the way, he carefully moved away from the two men and stood on the dock.

If it had been Lawrence, he would absolutely have tried to eavesdrop on the conversation—so Col's restraint was laudable.

Whether or not she had made the same estimation, Holo went over to Col and whispered something into his ear.

Lawrence couldn't hear what they were saying, of course, but Col looked up at Holo, surprised, then over to Lawrence himself, as though the topic somehow involved him.

In these circumstances, it could hardly be anything friendly.

Holo whispered in Col's ear again, and he nodded seriously.

She never once looked back in Lawrence's direction.

Though he wasn't worried about Holo disappearing forever the way he had worried in the past, that just gave him a worse feeling about all of this—because Holo knew all of the cards in his hand.

"Right—ahoy! Master!" Evidently the boatmen had finished their talking with characteristic speed, and Ragusa now turned and called out to Lawrence with a wave of his hand.

There was nothing else for Lawrence to do but climb up on the dock.

Holo was standing next to Col, their hands joined.

The two looked more like siblings than anything else, so the sight did not disturb Lawrence the way seeing her with Amati had.

"What is it?"

"Ah, my apologies. It looks like we're going to be walking a bit."

"Walking?" Lawrence asked as the other man, his business concluded, remounted his horse and spurred it farther upriver.

"A big ship's run aground, it seems. Now the whole river's jammed. Everybody was so greedy about getting their furs through, they didn't notice until it was too late, and it just started piling up. Apparently there's a sunken ship on the river's floor now,

and they can't find the sunken ship's boatman anywhere, so there may have been some kind of disturbance."

"That's..."

In times of war or when a mercenary troupe was starving, they would attack merchant vessels in this way.

Given the endless and gently sloping plains of this region, the river was shallow and gentle enough that it could be rendered impassable with a single strike.

So a single boat would feign distress and sink, bringing the boats behind it to a standstill, whereupon those boats would be attacked. Naturally doing such things during peacetime would earn one untold amounts of enmity from the landholders who collected taxes from the region.

However, Lawrence could think of one person who was reckless enough to do it.

There was nothing left to do but take off hat and cloak and wave them about.

It was enough to make Lawrence genuinely want to cheer Eve on.

"So, what'll it be?" asked Ragusa.

He was clearly asking whether they could continue to Kerube or not. They had not come half the way to their destination—but that said, it would not be a short walk back to Lenos, either.

If they had a horse it would be different, but more of the boatmen were willing to carry cargo than passengers.

"Fortunately, there's no word of mercenaries in the area, so things should be restored soon. But the other boats loaded with cargo are at a standstill. Aside from the ones who are desperate enough to jump into the water and swim ashore, they're not going anywhere. If I can unload some of the goods from this boat, I'll have some excess carrying space, which I want to use to carry people and cargo from the grounded boats to the shore. So—I'm sorry, but I'll need you to walk."

After having taken them on board, it was stunningly disgraceful for a boatman to ask his passengers to go ashore and walk. It hardly mattered whether the circumstances were his fault or not.

Ragusa was a boatman who lived within that value system, and his face was clouded.

"I am a merchant, so if you'll lower your fee, I'll walk as much as I need to."

It wasn't quite a friendship between men of different occupations, but Ragusa smiled ruefully and shook hands with Lawrence nonetheless.

The problem was Holo, but before Lawrence could turn to her, Ragusa continued speaking. "Still, I can't very well force a maiden to walk in this cold without any preparation. I hear there are some rather devout fellows stuck on that river. If a girl you could mistake for a goddess were riding along with me, I'm sure it'd pick up their spirits."

Lawrence was a bit relieved.

His stomach hurt at the mere thought of walking along with a silent, uncooperative Holo, and even if she'd been happy, trudging around in this cold would surely have brought out her displeasure.

"So," said Ragusa, "in that case, first I'll need to unload the cargo."

"I'll help."

"Hey now, that makes it sound like I was trying to get you to help me." Ragusa smiled.

Lawrence could only be impressed—he could hardly refuse to help now.

"I said 'unload,' but it's really just the wheat and beans. The chests can stay where they are."

"Shall we get started, then?" said Lawrence, glancing back at the cargo on the boat.

"Aye, lets!" called out Ragusa. "By the by, I couldn't help overhearing your fun little chat earlier."

"Wha—?" His exchange with Holo had been embarrassing enough that Lawrence was suddenly very flustered.

"Ah, don't worry! I didn't hear anything you'd be worried about," said Ragusa with a sheepish grin. "It was just about the *eni* coin."

"The *eni*?"

"Aye. It just so happens that's what I'm carrying right now."

Lawrence had wondered if those chests contained coins, but this was a coincidence indeed.

Either that, or Ragusa was teasing, having a bit of fun at Lawrence's expense—but as Lawrence thought it over, that seemed unlikely.

If the chests had contained gold or silver coin, they would've been attended by guards, and a merchant like Lawrence would never have been allowed to ride in the same boat.

And Ragusa's boat was loaded with fully ten chests. If fifty-seven chests were headed downriver in total, that meant roughly four other vessels of this size would be needed.

And because their cargo would have been decided ahead of time, it would be difficult for them to load up on furs for a quick profit. So they would have been tied up at port as usual, which would have made it all the more likely that Lawrence's eye would fall upon one of them.

This all stood to reason—and if it was so, then Ragusa might have some new information.

Lawrence looked at Ragusa with his merchant's eye, and it seemed that Ragusa was waiting for this.

Ragusa suggested with a wink that they first unload the cargo, signaling to Col and Holo (who had been listening to the conversation) to help, then placed his hand on Lawrence's shoulder

and brought his face conspiratorially near. "I've a bit of interest in the matter myself. For two years now, that same copper coin has been moved on a fixed day, in a fixed amount—fifty-seven chests, downriver, to the Jean Company, but I'd never given much thought to how many chests it was in total. It was fifty-seven chests, divided up into a certain amount, then carried downriver."

Holo was bringing Col a bit of food, water, and wine and giving him her other robe to wear—the expensive one she'd had made with Lawrence's money.

Surprised, Col tried to refuse, but in the end, he was forced to put it on.

Col admittedly looked a bit shabby.

He seemed to have some trouble walking in the robe; perhaps it was his first time wearing a long-hemmed article.

"Those fifty-seven chests become sixty when they leave the Jean Company, which means either somebody is secretly carrying more, or the Jean Company is scheming at something."

Returning to the boat, Ragusa stepped lightly aboard and hefted a sack of wheat, which Lawrence took and left on the dock.

Col saw this and quickly hauled out the bean sacks, which he could carry.

The boy's willingness to work hard impressed Lawrence, but he wondered if Col was just trying to eavesdrop on the conversation between him and Ragusa.

"I appreciate the Jean Company always giving me this cargo, and I trust my fellow boatmen doing the same job. But it's these times. Surely God would forgive us being forced to take on a bad partner, would he not?"

Lawrence wasn't Col, but he could certainly still be fooled.

"Of course, it's too soon to take that paper and go to the Jean Company, but one of those chests is a fair transport fee. If this turns out to be the Jean Company's weak point, we'd be in a bind."

It was the problem that faced all who accepted a job.

Lawrence took the last sack of wheat from Ragusa, piled it up on the dock, then answered, "I've no intention of trying to expose the truth of the situation. I'm quite satisfied if I can safely build this house of cards."

"Then I'm sure I can let the ravings of a traveling merchant slide—even if do have a certain partner," said Ragusa with a smile.

For Ragusa and his comrades, who would work on the river their entire lives, the happiness of their clients was an issue of desperate importance. And yet being forced to work with a strange partner could get them literally sunk. They would want to know the truth at least, but the world of those who traveled the river was a small one, and they could not afford to whisper to one another. But a traveling merchant from beyond that world—that was different.

Lawrence wondered if he was overthinking things, but this was at least close to the truth.

Col took Holo's things from her and, without being asked, added them to his own, shouldering the combined burden.

Noticing Lawrence's gaze, he looked in Lawrence's direction, but Lawrence only waved lightly and gestured for him to go on ahead.

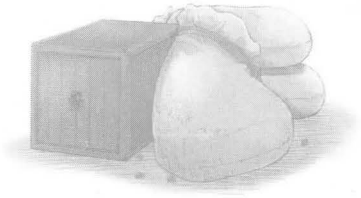
"Right, then, do mind my companion—try to keep her from being too awe-inspiring, eh?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Can't have her getting any more worshippers, after all. Worry not, it's not too far on foot. We'll surely meet up by nightfall."

Lawrence nodded, then glanced at Holo, but she was already lying down, curled up in her blanket.

As he looked at her sleeping form, he very keenly appreciated that there was more than one way to quarrel.

CHAPTER FOUR



The walk along the riverbank took its toll.

Having traveled for so long on a wagon, though he wasn't exhausted, Lawrence found it difficult to keep pace with Col.

He wondered how his feet were supposed to keep up this speed.

It made him long for the days when he had been accustomed to traveling on foot and could travel twice as fast as the envious wagon-bound merchants if he was in a hurry.

"There's no gain in hurrying so," Lawrence finally said.

"Yes, sir," the boy replied meekly, slowing his pace.

Ragusa's suddenly lightened vessel had headed downriver with Holo aboard and was soon out of sight. The boats behind it were all larger, and because they were all being stopped at the checkpoint, the river was very quiet.

The calm river's surface was slick looking and shiny, like the slime trail left behind a snail, and it was amusing to watch.

Lawrence almost wanted to say that it looked as though glass had been laid down on the earth, but that seemed a bit exaggerated.

Suddenly a fish splashed through the surface, ruining the glassy look.

"Um, Master—?" The little fish beside Lawrence took the opportunity to make its own splash.

"What is it?"

"About the *eni*..."

"Ah. You're wondering if there's any money to be made?" asked Lawrence sharply, perhaps out of habit from spending time with Holo. Col nodded, face sober.

The boy thought making money was shameful.

Lawrence faced ahead, inhaling the cold air through his nose and exhaling from his mouth. "I doubt it."

"I...see."

Col was wearing Holo's robe; when he slumped in dejection, it looked like Holo slumping in dejection.

Lawrence shocked himself by reaching his hand out, but Col seemed only slightly surprised when his head was patted.

"Though I wouldn't have guessed you'd be having trouble with money." Lawrence pulled his hand back from Col's head, opening and closing his fingers several times.

He had expected it to feel different from Holo's, but apart from the lack of ears, it felt much the same.

Seen from behind, the only difference Col's figure cut would be the lack of the bulge that Holo's tail created.

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm? Just what I said. Even among wandering scholars, the really clever ones have more money than they can carry and drink wine every day."

It was a bit of an exaggeration, but there were definitely students who earned enough to pay to hear a dozen lectures from a professor clear to the end.

Col had become involved in bookselling because he didn't have enough for even a single lesson.

"Uh, er...I guess there are some like that, yes."

"Have you ever wondered how they get their money?"

"...Surely they steal it from others, I should think."

When looking at someone who's achieved something beyond imagining, it's easy to assume his dishonesty.

One simply concludes he's using some fundamentally different method.

Col's estimation this time was a bit low.

"I expect they're earning money much the same way you do."

"Huh?" Col looked at Lawrence with an expression of disbelief.

It was the same expression Holo used when Lawrence managed a truly excellent verbal comeback.

And because his opponent wasn't Holo, he could afford a bit of pride—but when Lawrence realized what he was doing, he chuckled, chagrined, and scratched his cheek. "Mm. And the only difference between you and fellows like that is effort."

"...Effort?"

"Yes. On your journey, did you sleep nights under borrowed roofs or beg your meals one at a time?"

"Yes."

"So it looks like you think you put forth some effort yourself," said Lawrence with a smile. Col's face tensed, and he looked down.

He was sulking.

"What you put effort into was asking with all your heart if you could please take shelter from the wind or rain or if you could have some hot porridge to warm your cold body."

Col's eyes flicked right, then left, then he nodded.

"But that lot, they're different. They're always focused on getting the most, the biggest return. The stories I've heard are incredible. They put merchants to shame."

There was no reaction for a while, but Lawrence wasn't worried.

He knew Col was a smart lad.

"What...what do they do?"

Asking for instruction was no easy thing—and it was harder the cleverer one was. The more confidence one has in oneself, the more difficult it becomes to ask for help.

Of course, there are people who claim asking others is easier and start out that way.

But those people didn't have eyes like Col's.

Lawrence didn't answer immediately, instead removing a small cask from the pack Col carried, uncorking it, and taking a drink.

It was wine, distilled to the point of being only palely tinted.

He jokingly offered the cask to Col, who shook his head hastily.

The boy's eyes were tinged with fear. He had set out on his journey knowing nothing and had surely met with terrible misfortune.

"For example, say you knock on the door of a house somewhere, and you get a single smoked herring."

Col nodded.

"And say it's desperately meager, and when you remove the skin, there's hardly any meat at all, just the stink of smoke and not much else. So what do you do next?"

"Um..."

Col had in all likelihood faced this situation before, so it was no mere hypothetical.

His answer came quickly. "I would...eat half, then save the other half."

"And eat it on the next day."

"Yes."

Lawrence was impressed the boy had made it this far.

"So once you had a herring, you wouldn't then go try to get some soup?"

"...Are you saying I should go around to lots of houses?" Col spoke not admiringly; his eyes seemed a bit dissatisfied.

For Lawrence, this conversation could hardly fail to be amusing.

"So there's a good reason you don't do that?"

Col nodded, displeased.

He wasn't so stupid as to do something without a reason. "The reason I succeeded once... was because I was lucky."

"That's true. The world isn't overflowing with good, kind people, after all."

"..."

He had taken the bait this far.

Holo would have pretended to swallow it, then tied the fishing line to the bottom of the pond. The moment Lawrence pulled up on the rod, he would be dragged under.

Col would not do such things.

"In business, the more money you have, the more smoothly things go. It's because you have more tools. But you go into battle unarmed every time. So you come out of it wounded."

Col's eyes wavered.

They wavered but soon regained their vitality.

This was what it meant to be clever.

"...So you mean I should use the herring?"

The hook was set now.

To think that there was such pleasure in the world.

"That's right. You take the herring, and with it seek your next donation."

"Wha—?" Col's look of surprise was so profound it seemed it would never fade.

And why wouldn't he be surprised?

How could someone who's already received one fish use it to ask for another one?

But it could be done.

And easily.

"You take the herring. It's better if you have a friend, and younger than you. You take him along and knock on a door. 'Ex-

cuse me, sir,' you say. 'You live devoutly by the teachings of God. Look, sir—I have a single herring. But I cannot possibly eat it. Please look, sir—look at my companion. Today is his birthday. If you could spare us some kindness, and give me alms enough to make this herring into a pie for him to eat. Just enough for that, sir—please.'"

Solicitousness was the specialty of the merchant.

Lawrence made a good performance of it as Col gulped and watched.

"Listen to this speech. Who could refuse? The key is asking for just enough money for herring pie. Nobody is going to light their stove for you, but if it's money, they'll certainly spare some."

"Ah, er, so you mean any amount—"

"Yes. You take one herring from house to house, and some of those people are going to tell you that one herring isn't possibly enough, so you'll get more. Then once you've made the rounds through town, whoosh."

Col looked so dazed that one could have hung a sign that said DAZED on him and collected coins for the performance.

He seemed to be tasting the shock of having his entire world turned upside down.

There were amazing people in the world who could imagine truly inconceivable things.

"I won't go so far as to say, 'Hunger knows no law,' but depending on how you think about it, there's no harm in giving alms to a poor wandering scholar, and giving even a small amount of money makes the giver feel good about themselves, so nobody loses. If you have extra money or food, you can even give some to your accomplice. So what do you think? Did you learn anything?"

What made Holo's sleeping face so attractive was that her normally guarded wisewolf mien was innocent, guileless.

However, that was usually irrelevant.

Col's face was so naive in the face of the shock that, while he wasn't as fetching as Holo, he definitely did have his own charm.

"Ignorance is a sin." Lawrence patted the back of Col's head, at which Col sighed and nodded.

"I've heard the saying 'Know thyself.'"

"Well, that's true, but the important thing is—," began Lawrence but then looked behind him at the sound of hooves.

Perhaps there had been men on horses riding on the boat that had been held up at the checkpoint.

They were approaching at high speed—but whether they were horses or simply giant loads of fur, it was difficult to tell.

One horse. Two. Then three.

Seven in total.

How many men among them would be able to realize the profits they'd been anticipating?

Even if they knew something, it would be difficult to turn that into profit.

The important thing was—

"The important thing is to think of something nobody else is thinking of. 'Ignorance is a sin' is not about knowledge—it's about wisdom."

Col opened his eyes and gritted his teeth.

The hand that held the strap of the bag over his shoulder trembled a bit.

He looked up. "Thank you very much, master."

Truly, only the gods profit in the end.

It was quite pleasant traveling with Col.

The boy kept silent, though, on the matter of what Holo had said to him earlier.

He was clad in Holo's hooded cloak.

Holo had long since left her scent on the boy.

It would be difficult to reverse that.

"Hey, I can see it up ahead!"

"Hmm? ... Oh, indeed. Looks like it's turned into quite a mess."

On the gently downward-sloping plain, the view ahead was free from obstacles.

There was still a good distance to walk, but nonetheless the main details were apparent.

True to Ragusa's words, a large ship was diagonally blocking the river, and behind it was a tangle of vessels caught in the obstruction.

The boat that was stopped near the riverbank might have been Ragusa's.

There were many men on horseback as well, the majority of whom were surely the messengers of noblemen, bearing urgent news.

Many other people milled around, but it was difficult to tell what they were doing.

"It seems kind of like a festival," said Col, dazed, and Lawrence gave the boy's profile a casual glance.

Maybe it was because the boy was looking far off into the distance, but somehow he seemed lonely, as though he were longing for his homeland.

Lawrence, too, had left his tiny home village and its stifling gray air but still sometimes thought fondly of it.

The boy's eyes seemed moist, but the sun was fairly low in the sky, so it might simply have been from the color-tinged light that reflected in them.

"Where were you born?" Lawrence asked without thinking.

"Huh?"

"If you don't want to answer, that's fine, too." Even Lawrence, when asked where he was from, would put on airs and name the town closest to the hamlet where he was born.

Of course, half of the reason he did so was because nobody would recognize the name of his village anyway.

"U-um, it's a place called Pinu," said Col nervously; Lawrence had indeed never heard of it.

"Sorry, I don't know it. Where is it? The east?"

From Col's accent, Lawrence guessed he might also be from the deep southeast.

It was a country of hot seas and limestone.

Of course, Lawrence had only heard stories of it.

"No, the north. Actually, it's not so very far from here..."

"Oh?"

If he was from the north and wanted to study Church law, he might have been related to immigrants from the south.

There were many who had abandoned their households to seek new lands in the north.

But most of those had been unable to accustom themselves to the new place, and things had been difficult.

"Are you familiar with the Roef River that flows into the Roam?"

Lawrence nodded.

"It's toward the headwaters there—up in the mountains. Winters are cold, I suppose. But when the snow falls, it's very pretty."

Lawrence was a bit surprised.

He remembered the story about Holo that was in the book he'd borrowed from Rigolo. It said that she'd come out of the mountains of Roef.

But when it came to people wandering about this region, ones from the south were surely rare.

The Roef River was quite long—the population of its basin was certainly the greater figure.

"If you're moving slowly, it's two weeks from here. If things really don't work out, I was thinking I might go back home," said Col, embarrassed. Lawrence, of course, did not smile.

It required an unbelievable amount of determination to leave one's village.

Whether one shook off the village's control and left or enjoyed its ardent support, one couldn't very well just waltz back in without having achieved the goal.

Yet wanting to return home was an emotion that everyone felt at one point or another.

"So did you immigrate to Pinu, then?"

"Immigrate?"

"What I mean is, did you migrate there from the south?"

Col gaped for a moment, then shook his head. "N-no, but there's a story that the village's original location sank into the bottom of a lake created in a landslide."

"Oh no, I just mean that not many people from the northlands study Church law."

Col's eyes twinkled at the words, and he smiled with a touch of self-consciousness. "My master—er, I mean, Professor Rient—used to say such things, as well. 'If only more people from the pagan lands would open their eyes to the Church's teachings,' he would say."

Lawrence wondered why Col's bashful smile seemed so self-conscious.

"No doubt. Did any missionaries come to your town?"

If they had been moderate missionaries, it would be by God's grace. Most fought with sword in hand, engaging in plunder and murder under the auspices of "reform."

But if that had been the case, Col would have learned to loathe the Church and would never have thought to study Church law.

"No missionaries came to Pinu," he said, and again his gaze was fixed in the distance.

His profile was somehow terribly unsuited to his true age.

"They came to a village two mountains away—a place smaller

than Pinu, with many hunters skilled in trapping owl and fox. One day men came there from out of the south and built a church."

It seemed unlikely that Col would then explain that the villagers had thankfully listened to the missionaries' sermons and opened their eyes to God.

The reason was obvious.

"But," said Lawrence, "each village had its own god; those who rebelled against the Church were—"

Surprised, Col looked at Lawrence.

That was more than enough.

"I guess you'd have to say I'm an enemy of the Church now. Can you explain what happened?" asked Lawrence.

Still stunned, Col seemed to be on the verge of saying something, but unable to form the words, he closed his mouth.

He looked down, casting his gaze this way and that, before looking back up at Lawrence.

"Truly?"

It was obvious Col was unused to doubting other people.

If he stayed this softhearted, much suffering awaited him.

And yet for all that, it was part of the boy's charm.

"Yes, in God's name I swear."

Col's wincing face was so charming that Lawrence couldn't help patting the boy's head.

"...The headmen of all the villages in our region hadn't assembled in 220 years, I heard," began Col. "They met for many days, discussing whether to bow to the Church or to fight back. As I remember it, the mood wasn't one of agreeing to hold a discussion with the Church, I don't think. The news that reached us across the mountains every day was only about who had been executed. But eventually winter came, and the leader of the Church fell ill, and we were saved when he left the mountain, muttering that he didn't want to die in a pagan land like this. Of course, if it had come to

a fight, we knew the mountains and there were more of us, so we would have won."

If that had been the real intent, they would have done so when the Church started taking violent action.

The reason they hadn't was because they all understood what would happen if reinforcements arrived.

It wasn't as though no information ever entered the mountain villages from the outside world.

"But after the Church leader became ill and had to simply withdraw, I began thinking."

As soon as he said it, Lawrence understood.

Col was a bright lad.

Instead of thinking about his personal beliefs, he chose to take the most logical path to defend his village.

He realized the absurd power that came with wearing the robes of a high-ranking priest, the power to begin and end the exchange of human lives at will.

He would study Church law and eat into its power structures.

That was how Col intended to protect his village.

"And no one opposed your decision?"

Even Holo would become emotional, talking of her homeland.

Col wiped his tears with the edge of his hood, clasped in balled-up hands. "The headman... and the elder woman... supported me."

"I see. They must have believed that you could do it."

Col nodded, then stopped to wipe his tears on his shoulder before walking again. "They secretly lent me some money, too... so I have to find a way to get back in school."

His greatest motivation was perhaps the need for money.

He who fought for the sake of something else was always stronger than he who fought for himself.

Lawrence was not, however, so prosperous that he could afford to become Col's patron.

But he might be able to give the boy some small aid.

By teaching him how to make a bit of money and how to avoid traps, Lawrence might be able to bring a bit of color to the boy's journey.

"I can't really help you out with your money problems right now, but..."

Col sniffled. "Oh! N-no, that's not—"

"But about that copper coin. If you can find enough of an answer to convince Ragusa, then there might be a reward in it for you."

The reason Lawrence didn't stipulate the answer was because there was no way of knowing what that was without asking the Jean Company. But while that was impossible, they might infer enough of the truth to convince Ragusa.

There'd be no sin in expecting a reward for such a thing.

One had to reward anyone who helped pluck a thorn from his finger.

"Of course, the most helpful effect it will have is taking away the nervousness of the journey," said Lawrence with a smile, lightly patting Col's head.

While by Holo's standards, Lawrence was always being too serious, compared to this boy, he was practically mellow.

"Still, just a moment ago you said it looked like a festival—did you mean it looked like Pinu's festivals? Are they like that?" asked Lawrence, pointing at the grounded vessel now that the details of the scene had come into view.

A small mountain of wreckage from the ships had been collected on the riverbank, and beside it, several men were lighting fires and drying their clothes.

But that was certainly not the main event—the main event was the rope that extended from underneath the grounded vessel and the men on the shore that were pulling on it.

They were a mix of ages and appearances, with their only commonality being that their journey downriver had been interrupted by this calamity.

A few of the greediest were shouldering their cargoes and heading downriver, but most set them aside and put their backs into pulling on the rope.

Even a long-mantled knight on horseback was joining in the effort, so spirits were high. A few men were on the ship's deck with poles, keeping it from tipping over or being washed away—they raised their voices in chorus along with the rest.

Col watched the scene, entranced, then at length looked back at Lawrence. "This is more fun than that!"

Lawrence held back the words that came upon seeing Col's expression.

It was hard to imagine a more suitable apprentice should he choose to take one—and not just because Holo had said so.

Once Lawrence's journey with Holo came to an end, the cold, hard, lonely road of the traveling merchant still awaited him. And even if Col was no substitute for Holo, the lad could certainly sit in the driver's box beside Lawrence.

But Col had his own goals and did not exist only for Lawrence's convenience.

Which was why Lawrence forced himself not to ask, "Will you be my apprentice?" (though it took considerable effort).

Lawrence grumbled quietly to the gods that Col's goal was not becoming a merchant.

"I suppose we'd best help them out, then. Pulling on that rope will warm us against the chill."

"Yes, sir!"

Just as Lawrence and Col began to walk, Ragusa waved his pole with a smile and raised his voice, his boat slipping lightly down the river.

* * *

There was a huge difference between watching from afar and actually pulling on the rope.

The peaty ground sloshed around when stepped on, and without gloves, the rope and the cold air mercilessly wore away at the skin of the hands.

On top of that, because the rope was attached to a section of the ship that was below the waterline, the people pulling would heave back against the unyielding resistance, only to have it give way in sudden spurts.

Whereupon everyone would naturally fall over, and soon they were all covered in mud.

Lawrence and the other merchants and travelers started out enthusiastically, but as soon as the hardship became apparent, they began to visibly lose their vigor.

No matter how hard they pulled, the only things that surfaced were fragments of the ruined ship, so morale—like the vessel—was low.

And the boatmen, who had stripped naked in the freezing weather to dive underwater and attach the rope to the ship, were blue-lipped and white-faced with the cold.

After lighting a fire, a traveling actress and a seamstress—encouraged by Holo and Ragusa—jumped into the river, but the water was so cold that no amount of willpower could overcome it. When they dragged themselves back onto the bank, they looked terrible.

Finally, unable to watch any further, an older boatman called out. Perhaps boatmen were too stubborn themselves to admit that it was impossible. His distorted face was painful to see.

A wave of surrender was emanating from Lawrence and the rest. Merchants were quick to pull out of a game once they saw there was no profit in it.

The boatmen, who lived their lives on the river, seemed to have every intention of using sheer willpower to raise the ship, but as one and then another let go of the rope and doubled over in exhaustion, they seemed to understand that it was impossible. They held a conference around a middle-aged member of their profession and soon came to a decision.

Both Lenos and Kerube were distant, and the sun would soon be setting.

If the boatmen made their passengers wait any longer, they would unavoidably leave a bad impression.

Without further ado, the rope hauling was ended.

Lawrence did not neglect his own fitness, but he rarely had the need to do such labor. His body felt leaden, and the palms of his hands burned as though scorched. His swollen left cheek was cold enough that it no longer felt painful.

"Are you all right?" Lawrence asked.

Col had quickly pulled away from the tug-of-war. Perhaps because of the festive atmosphere around him, he'd done his best, carried away by the mood and putting all his strength into the task.

But his body was slender and he soon reached the end of his endurance, retreating apologetically from the task.

"Ah, yes... I'm really sorry."

"Don't be. Look at all these merchants. They wish they'd done what you did." Lawrence motioned with his chin at the small clumps of merchants sitting here and there, who weren't even trying to hide their irritation at the unfavorable outcome that the investment of their effort had produced.

Some of them were losing their temper—most likely the ones who were trying to move furs downriver.

"How do you plan to compensate us for this loss?" they cried.

If Lawrence had also been moving cargo this way, he would

have felt much the same. Though he felt bad for the boatmen who were the target of such anger, he did nothing to intervene.

And the worst part of the entire situation were the people aboard the boats that had been hung up on the wreckage of the sunken ship—particularly a boat roughly triple the size of Ragusa's that was literally heaped with furs. They were trying to get the furs ashore, and looking at the amount, Lawrence could understand why. Even if there hadn't been a sunken ship blocking the middle of the river, a small disturbance would have been sufficient to capsize the overloaded vessel.

A quick search did not reveal whoever was to blame for the situation.

Lawrence imagined they were hiding in order to avoid criticism, but that hardly seemed cowardly.

It was no exaggeration to say that in trade, whoever was first to move their goods was the first to profit. That was especially true for seaport towns, where great ships would arrive carrying huge amounts of goods, and it was even said that for ships carrying the same goods, only the first two to arrive would turn any profit.

A ship sinking in the river was not a common occurrence, so it was a near certainty that it was Eve's doing—it was the perfect way to guarantee her own profits and the perfect way to cause those following her no end of grief.

Several merchant-looking men weren't even complaining, and instead sat dispirited, their heads in their hands, tormented by the uncertainty of whether they would be able to turn their furs into money.

There was no telling how many of them would be able to maintain their composure.

It would hardly be surprising if they simply exploded.

"So...what will happen next?" Col asked, producing a water skin and handing it to Lawrence.

Col was in no particular hurry to arrive in Kerube; he was simply taking in the scene and asking a question.

"The river has many owners along its way, and each is responsible for what happens on his section. Most likely the landlord of this section will dispatch horses and men first thing in the morning—with horses pulling, I'm sure they'll be able to haul the wreck out."

"I see..." Col looked hazily at the river's surface, perhaps imagining the team of horses all attached to the rope.

Lawrence put the water skin to his lips as he gazed at the wreck, its prow pointing straight up out of the water as though it were about to jump into the air.

Suddenly he heard footsteps.

He turned, thinking it might be Holo, but there was Ragusa.

"Ho, friend! Sorry to make you walk," said the man with a light wave, which allowed Lawrence to see the palm of his thick hand was swollen and red.

No doubt getting people and goods ashore with the river so jammed with boats had been a difficult task.

The effort of getting his boat so close to the shore had certainly taken more effort than his usual work did.

If even a little bit of the hull was touching the ground, moving the vessel required no ordinary amount of strength.

"Not at all—I don't mind walking along the river."

"Ha-ha-ha! I'll take you at your word, then," a chagrined Ragusa said with a laugh, scratching his face and looking out at the river with a sigh. "This really is the worst luck. I guess they'll be able to do something about it by tomorrow morning."

"Do you think the ship sinking has anything to do with the fur trade?" asked Lawrence. It was natural to think so.

Thus asked, Ragusa nodded, tousling Col's hair as the boy stared vaguely out at the river, exhausted. "I reckon so. Still, this is

madness. Must be some fool who holds money dearer than their life. They could be strapped to the breaking wheel for this, without so much as a by-your-leave. Terrifying."

The breaking wheel was a gruesome form of execution, with victims being tied to a wagon wheel and broken, then left upon a hill to be eaten by the crows, still tied to the wheel.

Lawrence was confident that Eve would escape, though.

He even hoped she would safely claim her profits, bearing her no ill will for snatching his own.

"So what of you lot, then?" asked Ragusa.

"What do you mean?"

"If you keep walking down the road, there's an inn attached to a checkpoint. Of course, it's no place for a lady to stay the night," said Ragusa, looking over at Holo.

Holo, for her part, was chattering happily with a tall woman who looked to be an actress or performer.

"Right now, the master of that wreck of a ship along with the cargo owner are headed upriver to negotiate with some peddlers. I daresay that food and drink will arrive around sundown, but if you wait for that, you'll be camping, make no mistake."

Lawrence now understood why the ship's master had been nowhere to be seen.

"We never expect to have a roof over our heads while traveling. Quite the contrary—we'll be thankful that it's solid ground rather than a rocking boat," answered Lawrence.

Ragusa winced as if looking at something very bright, then shrugged his muscled shoulders awkwardly.

He then sighed. "I'm just glad it's only merchants on the boats. If we'd been carrying mercenaries, this would've gone very badly."

"Still, some of them seem quite angry."

Ragusa laughed. "I'll take their shouting! Mercenaries will draw their swords first and ask questions later."

Perhaps at the casualness with which Ragusa spoke, Col shrank back as though having swallowed a grape pip.

"Still, whoever sank that ship had best watch their step. I hope Count Bulgar catches them."

While Lawrence was inwardly cheering for Eve, he certainly understood Ragusa's anger.

But he felt that if he responded to that statement, he might give away his own feelings, so Lawrence changed the subject.

"Didn't you have some urgent cargo, as well?"

The boat carried copper coin.

Since it was meant to be carried across the sea, its transport plan was stricter than normal cargo.

"Aye. The plan was to take delivery of the cargo in Lenos, but the merchant was late—so I'm already behind schedule. None of this is my fault, but when I think of what'll happen once I make it to Kerube, it's downright depressing."

"I've carried cargo like that before. It's nerve-racking," agreed Lawrence.

To make a single suit of clothes, it was quiet common for the sourcing of the raw materials, the construction, the dyeing, the tailoring, and the final sale to all be in different towns.

As it traveled from one merchant to another, one shipper to another, a single hiccup in the process would disrupt the entire chain.

That sheep's wool from some far-flung land could cross the ocean to become clothing in another was a miracle by itself—to be able to do it on schedule and at a profit was godlike achievement.

But it is the way of the world that the impossible is frequently demanded.

Ragusa's hardships were hidden.

"And worse, it's cargo with a strange history! Did you figure anything out about that?"

He undoubtedly meant that the number of copper coins headed to the Jean Company in Kerube did not add up.

If it turned out to be something interesting, Ragusa would probably feel some measure of satisfaction.

"Unfortunately not."

"Well, nobody's noticed so far. I guess it's not a question so easily answered."

That stood to reason.

"By the way—," Ragusa began.

"Yes?"

The big man cracked his neck and turned back to Lawrence, continuing, "Did something happen with your lovely companion?"

"Wh—"

Lawrence's inability to coolly ask "Why would you ask?" was proof enough that something had indeed happened.

Even the drowsy Col now looked up at Lawrence.

How did Ragusa know something had happened?

"Why, I just wondered why she hadn't come back to you now that things have calmed down a bit—guess I was right," said Ragusa, and though Col nodded, he seemed a bit shocked. "Come now," Ragusa continued, "you can't tell me you didn't notice after how close you were before. She didn't seem to want to leave your side for a moment! Am I right?" He directed these last words to Col, who nodded hesitantly.

Lawrence looked away and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Ragusa. "Don't grow up like this fellow, you hear?"

Lawrence groaned at this final blow, battered by Col's timid, bewildered reply.

What would Holo say if she were here?

Come to think of it, she was probably eavesdropping with those keen ears of hers.

"So, come now—out with it."

"...Huh?"

"What did you quarrel over? When the wine and food arrives from upstream, things will turn very festive indeed, you know. And this lot is going to have their share of anger to vent once they get some liquor in their bellies. They'll be a pack of wolves."

Ragusa grinned, baring teeth that while crooked were strong enough to chew through even the toughest grass.

Lawrence's experiences on his journey had given him the means not to be too flustered by Ragusa's jokes; however, that he would be unable to speak with Holo during the festivities was a great loss, indeed.

If nothing else, the fact that the end of the journey was now decided meant he couldn't afford to waste even a single day with her.

How many chances remained to enjoy a festival with Holo?

Merchants were always considering profit and loss. Always.

And the fact remained that he still didn't know why Holo was angry. Perhaps to Ragusa, who was a few years older than Lawrence, the solution was obvious.

The problem was, he had to speak up.

Despite having finally gotten some measure of confidence in his relationship with Holo, it was not so strong that he could expose that relationship to a stranger and still feel confident.

"Come, have some trust in me! Listen well, now—" Ragusa put his massive arm over Lawrence's shoulders; it seemed strong enough to knock Lawrence out with a single wave.

It seemed as though he was trying to hide their conversation from Col, but Col stuck close to Ragusa and listened in.

"I've got some confidence when it comes to such troublesome matters. Know why?"

Lawrence shook his head, and Ragusa took his arm off Lawrence and thrust his chest out proudly. "I've been taking boats

up and down the river for past twenty years. When it comes to water under the bridge, you just leave it to me!"

Behind Ragusa and some distance away, Holo had been talking to the actress when Lawrence saw her suddenly burst into laughter.

She had been listening in.

Holo did not seem displeased.

Which meant she, too, wanted this cleared up as soon as possible.

And while Lawrence couldn't really count on Ragusa, he might as well talk to him, since Lawrence and Holo's relationship was evidently easily understood from the outside.

"In that case... may I?"

"Count on me, friend."

They put their heads together—not just Ragusa, either, but Col as well.

Though their ages and professions were different and though they had only met that same day, the three now looked like old friends.

Lawrence coolly considered that before he'd met Holo, this would never have happened.

He somehow felt that even if he had to leave her, he would be able to go on.

"Does anyone have any old rags or things they don't need?"

The call went out, and soon an impressive pile had been collected.

It was piled up on the riverbank as preparations for the festivities continued.

There had been a peddler selling food at the checkpoint upriver, and the man's entire mule load of food had been bought up and handed out without hesitation.

At first, several merchants had vented their spleens at the master of the sunken vessel and the fur shipper, as though the weight of their sins was equal to the weight of the furs they'd tried to move—but beating them wouldn't make the river usable.

Of course, that didn't mean that the other merchants would simply say nothing, but if anything, the loud exchanges were a kind of ceremony to shed the frustration that the clogged river had caused.

In the end there was no violence, and after a short pause, the food and drink the provisions shipper had bought was passed out, and smiles returned to everyone's faces.

Since there was nothing else that could be done, not enjoying themselves would have been a waste.

Despite the mood of enemies joining hands in merriment, there was no one by Lawrence's side.

Not even Ragusa or Col was there.

"Don't grow up like this fellow, you hear?"

After Lawrence had explained the circumstances of Holo's anger, the two had fallen silent.

At length, Ragusa had opened his mouth to speak, but not to Lawrence—to Col.

Col had very considerately not answered Ragusa's first question, but when Ragusa looked to him and asked, "You've figured it out, too, haven't you?" he had hesitantly nodded in the affirmative.

Which meant Lawrence was at fault—so Ragusa had put his heavy arm over Col's shoulders and forcibly taken the boy away.

He had left Lawrence with but a single hint.

"The river does indeed flow. But—why does it flow?"

It was a complete riddle.

Col had cocked his head in confusion at the words as well, but when Ragusa whispered in the boy's ear, his eyes had lit up with comprehension.

It seemed both of them had easily understood the reason for Holo's anger.

What was worse, it was evidently something so obvious that they had half given up on him, leaving him alone to ponder his mistakes.

Lawrence felt like an apprentice who had been left to stand outside because he was unable to do as he was told.

As he saw Ragusa and Col talking with Holo, that feeling grew more and more pronounced.

No—that was it exactly, with Holo conspicuously avoiding looking in his direction, and Col and Ragusa occasionally sneaking furtive glances.

When they realized Lawrence was looking back at them, he could tell, even at that distance, that they shrugged and smiled.

Holo dragged Col out from under Ragusa's arm, self-indulgently petting the boy's head and hugging him.

Lawrence could tell Col was getting flustered, but as soon as Col glanced at Lawrence, the latter could do nothing but look away, frowning.

He was being made fun of.

But strangely, Lawrence didn't feel bad—not even when being laughed at by Ragusa and Col as well as Holo.

Not long ago, right up until he had met Holo, he'd believed that once a merchant's reputation was damaged, regaining it was no simple task.

So he'd stuck out his chest, put on airs, told lies, and trusted no one.

And he realized that that behavior was exactly the same as what came to mind when he looked at Col.

When Lawrence had proposed to buy Col's sheaf of paper, Col had glared resentfully at him, as though refusing to be forced into selling it cheaply.

Such an action was worse than useless—it made Col look cheap and unsightly, yet Lawrence knew fully well that he himself had been captive to the same behavior until recently.

No wonder Holo teases me, he murmured inwardly, grabbing a handful of his own hair.

He started to question whether he was even a full-fledged merchant.

Holo clearly saw him as a conceited, self-absorbed youngster.

He couldn't help but smile.

Though he had been so starved for company that he'd begun to wish his horse would talk, becoming close to others really was this simple.

Lawrence wondered if the people he'd met so far had looked at him with the same indulgent smile with which Holo and Ragusa looked at the stubborn Col.

And yet—

"All this said, this doesn't tell me what the right answer is," said Lawrence to himself, sighing.

Ragusa and Col left Holo to get some of the wine that was going around.

Col must have had a bad experience with liquor in the past, because even from a distance, it was obvious he didn't like it, but Ragusa still hung drunkenly on to the boy.

Col had left the pack that he was carrying there by Lawrence; he took the distilled wine out of it.

Lawrence had chosen the strong distilled liquor in anticipation of the cold night aboard the boat, where it would be impossible to light a fire—but he expected Holo's reasoning was a bit different.

She had probably been thinking of something strange when she happily smacked Lawrence—but what?

The riddles piled up one after another.

Lawrence's confidence that he had a better-than-average

mind steadily eroded, but such pathetic thoughts lasted only a moment.

A cry arose, and suddenly there on the twilit riverbank bloomed a large fireball.

No—not a fireball, Lawrence realized, but the bonfire made of discarded rags and broken barrels flared up so fast once lit that it was an easy mistake to make.

Someone had to have thrown oil on it.

The thick black smoke rose into the air like a skull, the yellow flames crackling.

On a winter journey, where there was a fire, the words *friend* and *enemy* had no meaning.

At no particular signal, everyone raised their cups.

Then suddenly, things developed.

The woman Holo had been speaking with seemed indeed to be an actress, and she and her troupe jumped forth, as if proclaiming the event their stage.

There was flute and drum, song and dance. Some cheerful people followed, skillfully avoiding spilling their wine as they danced.

Their dance was not the smooth, careful footwork of the imperial palace, but a leaping, prancing, mad thing.

The rest of the gathered people watched and laughed, raising their voices together or, like Ragusa, playing drinking games.

No one was near Lawrence.

A sad smile rose to his lips, but he stifled it when he sensed a presence in the darkness borne from the fire.

There was only one person who would bother with a foolish traveling merchant like him.

He looked, and it was Holo.

"Whew. Talking after a long silence—it makes one thirsty," she said, as though talking to herself. She then swiped the cask away from Lawrence and took a drink.

This was no ale or thin wine.

Holo shut her eyes and clamped her mouth closed.

Then, after exhaling a great puff of breath, she sat down right on the spot.

She seemed to have given up on ignoring him, Lawrence thought, so he sat next to her.

"So, that actress... what were you talking ab—"

He didn't finish the sentence, because as soon as he started speaking, Holo looked bluntly away.

What stunned him was not that she wouldn't listen to him.

It was that he was happy about it.

"Ugh, 'tis a cold night," said Holo, not replying to Lawrence in the slightest. She did not meet his eyes, but as she spoke, she drew near him, just as she would when they were in the driver's box of the wagon.

At first, Lawrence wondered if she was being stubborn, but then he realized that he was the stubborn one.

He somehow got the feeling that if he apologized now, though it might be pathetic, she would forgive him.

It was earlier that she had been angry at him for failing to understand something obvious.

But now, it could be that since she had been able to make fun of and snicker at Lawrence, she would hear him out.

He was tempted to simply say, "I don't know."

Leaning against him there, she would probably look up, irritated at the noise.

Then she would hurl some irritated invective at him.

But she wouldn't stand up, nor would she move away from him.

It was as if she was saying that the closer she was, the better she could hear him.

Lawrence did not doubt the idea. After all, doubting that would be tantamount to doubting everything that happened on his travels with her.

A faint, chagrined smile appeared on his face.

Holo seemed to notice this; her ears flicked beneath her hood. Her tail wagged in anticipation of the pathetic words she would soon hear.

Lawrence spoke, as if to answer that anticipation.

"Those traveling performers are excellent. That's a lovely dance."

"Wha—?" Holo flinched away as though her tail had been stepped on, looking up at Lawrence.

"Hmm?" he asked, but of course received no reply.

There was nothing Holo hated more than being surprised by having her expectations defied.

The quick switching of her tail made her anger very clear.

It was clear, yet her amusement was also undeniable.

"I-I may have caught cold. My nose is rather itchy." The slight tremor in her voice might have been from the frustration at having been bested by Lawrence or from the effort of trying not to laugh.

Holo took a drink of the liquor, as though to swallow the feeling down, then burped.

Lawrence could tell that the ensuing silence came from each of them, groping for the next move, trying to best the other.

The sun gave a last glimmer before sinking beneath the horizon, and after a single breath, the stars flickered into existence. People crowded around the bonfire, merchant and boatman alike trying to turn the bad luck of the river delay into something special.

The journey of life was short, and one couldn't waste a single day.

The flute was blown, the drum beaten, and the misfortune of the sunken ship turned into a funny tune by a minstrel.

There were alluring dancing girls with sashes aflutter as they

danced, along with exhausted, clumsily dancing revelers, who seemed to constantly totter, on the verge of spilling the drinks they held.

Lawrence had been focused on getting Holo to say what was on her mind, but now he felt like he understood what it was that had settled into her thoughts.

Holo, who believed anything was better with drink, could hardly sit still in this environment. This was no time for her to be talking about her feelings with a hopelessly outclassed merchant.

Holo looked up at Lawrence doubtfully.

Since declaring that she would speak to him no more, perhaps she really planned to make good on that promise, but that said, he felt it would be a bad idea to stand up from this spot.

Perhaps that was it.

Lawrence ignored her gaze just as she'd ignored him, instead taking the wine cask from her hands. "With strong liquor, the cold won't be so bad for a while."

At those words, Holo seemed to smile at their shared stubbornness, her expression softening as she lightly touched Lawrence's hand, then stood.

Lawrence wondered if she was going to go dance, but her clothing was a bit loose, and her ears and tail were peeking out, which was a bit worrisome.

Holo's eyes shone.

No doubt her eyes had looked much like this during the festival they'd read about in Lenos.

And it was understandable, too, that in an atmosphere of fun like this, she might carelessly let slip her tail, and thus would come another name—the wheaten tail.

She might even become carried away and assume her wolf form, raising a great furor.

She surely wouldn't do something like that here and now, but

based on the way she was checking her robe and sash, she planned to do some serious dancing.

Looking at her, Lawrence couldn't help voicing what came to mind. "You should just take your wolf form and pull that sunken ship right out—"

It was not because Holo's happy expression suddenly vanished that Lawrence stopped talking; nor was it because he remembered that she wouldn't answer him.

Holo assuming her wolf form and pulling the wreck out of the river. It wasn't actually feasible, of course, but it was certainly within the realm of a forgivable joke.

It wasn't an awkward thing to say, really.

It wasn't that—it was that he really couldn't imagine Holo assuming her wolf form for just anyone.

As to why that was, the answer came to Lawrence immediately.

And that answer led him to another conclusion with startling speed.

Holo's once expressionless face now looked down on Lawrence with an exasperated smile; by contrast, Lawrence felt his own face grow sober. The reason Holo had been angry—he finally understood it.

"Honestly…," said Holo, looking around briefly before coming down to him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she sat lightly upon him.

As a man, it was a pleasant sensation for Lawrence, but given that she was doing this, she must have been truly angry enough to want to ignore him.

"One can flatter a pig right up a tree, but flattering a male just makes him lose himself. Didn't I say as much?" Holo half whispered into Lawrence's ear, their cheeks close enough to touch—but Lawrence knew full well her eyes were narrowed and sharp.

And the fact that Holo had looked around before coming to

him was not because she didn't want anyone to see her like this. It was quite the opposite.

At the end of his gaze, Lawrence saw Ragusa covering Col's eyes as the boy squirmed to get away, Ragusa laughing hugely.

His boatmen friends were watching too, of course, grinning as the sight made a pleasant side dish to go with their liquor.

It wasn't so much embarrassing as it was simply awkward.

"If our positions were reversed, you would surely have been just as angry. Am I wrong?"

Her resentful tone made Lawrence fear she'd bite his ear clean off.

But that was not what he was truly afraid of.

Holo did not kill her prey quickly—she preferred to toy with it for a while before ending its life.

"Hmph." She unwrapped her arms from around his neck, sat up, then looked down at Lawrence and spoke, baring her fangs. "Will you now show me how sincere you are?"

When she poked the tip of his nose with her finger, he did not resist.

Holo grinned, then stood up and spun about like a whirl of wind.

All that was left behind was the warmth of her body and her somehow sweet scent.

Her smile did not remain in his memory.

After all, as the one who held the coin purse, that was a very dangerous smile indeed.

"Sincerity?" Lawrence muttered to himself, taking a drink of liquor.

It had been when he was trying to get her to consider the copper coin puzzle with him.

Holo was very clever, and her abilities to jibe at Lawrence, laugh at him, and make him laugh were excellent. Her mind was so

sharp it could fairly be described as "mysterious"; it had saved him more than once.

So he thought she would enjoy the challenge.

But that hadn't been the case.

Ragusa had told Lawrence, "The river does indeed flow. But—why does it flow?"

Those words had once seemed a complete riddle to Lawrence, but now he understood their true meaning.

Boatmen rode upon the river's currents as they plied their trade. And those currents never ceased. But the boatmen did not take that flow for granted. They were always grateful to the river, even tearful at the deep generosity of the river spirit.

When Holo got angry, what Lawrence was guilty of was not trusting her enough. But taking her dependability as a given suggested that it was becoming less important, and he would eventually come to overlook it.

Suppose one's lover wrote him frequent love letters. If he asked her to write his reply for her, because she seemed to enjoy writing letters so much, he'd earn her wrath, and rightly so.

In other words, Holo had wanted to tell Lawrence that just because she put her wisdom to work solving his problems did not mean that she loved solving problems.

It was obvious if he thought about it.

While it was rather doubtful that Holo would bring her wisdom to bear for Lawrence's sake alone, at the very least, she would be angry with him if he didn't think so.

Lawrence fell back on the spot.

He had just been educated by Holo.

That was what made her smile so terrifying.

"Sincerity enough to balance this out…?" Lawrence sat back up and took another drink. "I haven't got it on hand!"

He exhaled a liquor-reeking breath, then looked at Holo, who was dancing in front of the fire.

As she waved her arms about in the happy dance, she didn't so much as glance at Lawrence.

He was already afraid of what she would make him buy her.

Holo joined hands with the dancing girl she had been talking to earlier on the riverbank, and the two danced with perfect footwork, as though they had practiced ahead of time. The sounds of flute playing and applause rewarded them.

As if conceding defeat to their display, the flaming pile of rags and wooden debris collapsed in on itself, blowing a shower of sparks into the air, like the sigh of a demon.

Lawrence could see a faint smile on Holo's feverish, serious face, and her dance had a somehow unsettling quality to it. Part of it was that she was simply that attractive, but she also seemed as though she were trying to forget something.

Since long ago, festivals had been celebrated to mark the end of one year and the beginning of the next and to quiet the anger of gods and spirits. Lawrence wondered if Holo's appearance was due to that feeling, but then as he was moving to take another drink, his hand froze.

He had realized earlier the reality that most of the things Holo did, she did for him.

Did that possibly apply to things outside of helping him think through puzzles and other such difficulties?

"Surely not—"

Holo danced with endless gaiety, seemingly unable to think about anything else—suddenly she seemed very small.

If Lawrence's guess was correct, her anger was over a foolish thing indeed.

If he was so much slower than her that he couldn't keep up, then it could also be said that she was running ahead on her own and meddling with things.

He drank, and the harsh liquor burned his throat.

Lawrence stood but not to join in the dancing circle.

To put it in his own stubborn words, he stood to collect information for Holo.

In Ragusa's circle, Col had already collapsed and lay faceup.

Lawrence walked toward them, giving a light wave, which Ragusa acknowledged with a lift of his cup.

Holo was a fool.

He wanted to prove it.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! The mountains of Roef?"

"Ho, it's a lovely place. I bring fine lumber out of it every year! Wood that came down this very river went to a kingdom in the far south, to produce a...urp...grand table for the palace. What say you to that, my young traveling merchant?" said the boatman, heartily pouring wine from his own wineskin into the cask Lawrence held.

The cask wasn't a barrel, so it was hardly possible to pour into it, and both the boatman holding the wineskin and Lawrence were rather unsteady of hand.

More and more of the wine spilled out of the cask, falling like a waterfall to the ground.

Lawrence was drunk enough that he didn't care.

"Well, in that case, you should write this on the side of the lumber: 'Your damn taxes are too high!'" said Lawrence loudly, bringing the cask to his mouth to take a drink when the boatman slapped him carelessly on the back, causing the wine to miss his mouth and go falling to the ground.

"Ah, yes! Right you are, m'boy."

Somewhere in the back of Lawrence's mind, he realized half-ruefully, half-proudly that not even Holo had ever gotten this drunk.

"So then, what of Roef?" Lawrence asked.

"Roef? I've taken fine lumber from the place...," began the boatman, repeating himself—but then he collapsed on the spot.

"What a lightweight," said one of his comrades, more disgusted than worried.

Lawrence grinned and looked around at the faces of the other men. "So, will you talk to me now?"

"Ha-ha-ha! I reckon we promised, so there's nothing to be done about it now. We'll let Zonal settle this one up," said a heavy-drinking boatman, smiling as he poked the head of his fallen comrade.

The boatman named Zonal was already passed out.

"Truly, though, to think you'd be this strong from dealing with a girl like that—"

"Aye, aye! Still, we must... we must keep our promises!"

"Aye, 'tis sho..."

"So you wanted to know of Roef?"

The last one to speak was Ragusa, who was evidently able to hold his liquor—his face was barely red.

The rest of them were, like Lawrence, a bit unsteady on their feet.

Lawrence himself was not entirely confident in his ability to remain conscious.

"Ah... yes, either that or a place called Yoitsu..."

"I've not heard of this Yoitsu. But Roef's hardly worth asking about—you just head back up this river. The Roef River joins up with it, and you just follow that all the way in."

I'm not asking about such trifling details, Lawrence thought to himself, but when he tried to remember what he was asking about, he couldn't remember.

He was drunk.

But Roef was the first clue he needed to follow.

"Can you not tell me something more... interesting?"

"Interesting, eh?" Ragusa rubbed his beard and looked over to his fellow boatmen, but to a man they seemed to be nodding off, succumbing to the alcohol. "Ah, I have it," he said, twisting his beard, then walking over to his fallen boatman comrade and shaking the man's shoulder violently.

"Hey you. Wake up! You said you took a strange job recently, didn't you?"

"Mnngh... uuh... can't hold any more..."

"Idiot! Hey! You brought it out of Lesko on the Roef headwaters, didn't you?"

The boatman named Zonal had been deliberately drinking with Lawrence, and he'd apparently been caught in an affair and had his head soundly cracked by his wife in revenge.

Lawrence himself was not unworried about what might happen if he was to fool around with another girl and Holo discovered it.

"Lesko? Ah, yes, 'tis a good town. Time after time, I brought copper out of the mountains there... It flowed out like water. Oh, and the liquor there's first-rate. How c'n I put it...? They've got dozens of machines there that bring the strongest liquor out of the thinnest wine. Oh, my copper-skinned bride! The blessings of fire and water be upon your shining skin!" called out Zonal before falling motionless again, his eyes closed. It was by no means clear whether he was awake or asleep.

Ragusa gave the man's shoulder another rough shake, but Zonal was by now a jellyfish tossed upon the waves.

"Worthless!"

"'Copper-skinned bride,' he said... Did he mean a still?"

"Mm? Oh, aye! You're quite knowledgeable. I've carried them as cargo a few times. The liquor you're drinking was probably distilled in a Lesko still."

Made from skillfully beaten sheets of copper, a still would certainly have an appealing red shine to it. And it was often said that

those who shaped the curved copper pieces had the female form in mind when they did so, so Lawrence understood Zonal's ramblings.

"Mm, this is no good. He won't awaken 'til morning."

"You said... something about a strange j-job?" Lawrence was quite drunk himself and was having difficulty speaking properly.

It occurred to him to wonder if Holo was all right, and when he looked around, a sight terrible enough to snap him out of his drunkenness in an instant greeted him at the end of his shaky vision.

"Yes, a strange job... hmm? Ha-ha-ha! She has a catlike quickness about her—it quite suits her, don't you think?"

Ragusa's laugh was directed at Holo, whose dancing figure had elicited a great cry of delight from the crowd.

She had shed her heavy robe, and her tail waved silkily about as she spun and danced, hands joined with the dancing girl.

On her head was the skin of what might have been a flying squirrel or some small animal, and at first glance, it looked as though she was flaunting both her ears and tail.

Lawrence was speechless at Holo's recklessness, but nobody else seemed to be concerned.

When he looked more carefully, he saw that the dancing girl, too, had a fox fur wrapped around her as an improvised tail, as well as a squirrel skin tied about her head.

While Lawrence couldn't help but marvel at Holo's nerve, he also couldn't rule out the possibility that his judgment had been dulled by the liquor.

Even as he worried about what would happen if she was found out, she seemed truly joyful as she danced.

And her long waves of hair and soft, fluffy tail caused something to stir within Lawrence's chest, like some mysterious sorcery.

"So, yes, about that strange job."

Lawrence snapped out of his dream at Ragusa's words.

Somewhere along the line, the question Holo had asked of him in Lenos—"Which is more important, me or profit?"—was becoming less and less difficult to solve.

What did it mean that he tried to excuse that thought away by telling himself that it was just the liquor?

Either way, Lawrence lightly hit his fog-filled head and turned his attention to what Ragusa was saying.

"He'd been carrying money orders for the same company over and over. That's the other reason I was interested in what you were talking about—I was afraid that old Zonal had gotten himself mixed up in some kind of strange dealings. And that company is the supplier for those copper coins. I don't have courage enough for such things."

Because places that imported and exported copper coins had to be close with the area's political power, there weren't many.

While a town might prosper thanks to a copper mine, in places where the whole of the town's fortune depended on that mine, the merchants and rulers of the area would be forced to collude.

Ragusa's voice was lowered; he wasn't saying anything good about the very same merchants who gave him work.

He must have seen a good deal of corruption already.

Lawrence's vision and speech were blurred, but on this topic, his mind was entirely clear.

"But... still, wouldn't that be... the sort of letter you'd leave to the butcher?"

Butchers were often given letters to deliver, since they made their rounds among local farmers to buy pigs or sheep nearly every day.

Boatmen went up and down the Roam River.

It wasn't strange that they would be given a coin order to deliver.

"Well, when he delivered a money order to the Jean Company in Kerube that he'd picked up in Lesko, he was apparently given a certificate of refusal."

"A certificate of refusal?"

Instead of sending a sackful of jingling coins, there would be a piece of paper that said to please pay so-and-so a certain amount of money at a certain place. The paper and the system behind it was known as a money order, but a refusal certificate meant somebody didn't want to turn the order into coin as requested.

But what was strange was the idea that anyone would send the same money order day after day when it was being rejected.

"Strange, isn't it? He was given money orders time and again, only to have them rejected every time. Someone is definitely up to something."

"...There...there may be some kind of circumstance..."

"Circumstance?"

"Er...It's a money order; in other words, they're transporting money. And money's value is always changing. If the money's value changed while the money order was in transit...so they might not want to honor the order, or..."

Ragusa's eyes were serious.

As long as he had money, a traveling merchant could go where he wished and buy whatever goods he liked, then go and sell them anywhere else—from a certain perspective, such a man was free.

By contrast, the livelihoods of Ragusa and his cohorts were tied to a single river.

If they angered a shipper, even the deepest, widest river might as well have dried up entirely.

Their weak position meant they were taken advantage of, involved in strange schemes only to be sunk outright.

Trading that involved boats was more enjoyable, but a horse and wagon could go wherever its driver pleased.

"So there's no need to...worry..." Lawrence's head slumped, and he yawned hugely.

Ragusa regarded Lawrence dubiously, then gave a deep sigh. "Hmph. The world is filled with vexing things."

"While it may be that ignorance is a sin...it's impossible to know everything."

Unable to bear the weight of his own eyelids, Lawrence's eyes grew narrower and narrower.

All that he could see now was Ragusa's cross-legged form, and Lawrence wondered if he would soon be at his limit.

"True enough. Hah. I watched the boy's clumsiness with a smile, but now I see I'm not so different myself. Unlike us, he was deceived by a cheap stack of paper, but in the right place, he'd be wiser than either of us, would he not?" said Ragusa, ruffling the passed-out Col's hair.

There was real regret in Ragusa's eyes, as though if Col had truly been unable to pay the boat fare, Ragusa would have used that to keep him on board.

"Church...law, was it?"

"Eh? Oh, yes...so he said."

"And what a vexing thing to study. If he'd work with me, he wouldn't have to study that. Plus he'd get three...no, two meals a day."

Lawrence found himself smiling at Ragusa's honesty.

With physical labor, you only got three meals a day when you were full-fledged.

"He seems to have a goal," said Lawrence, and Ragusa threw him a glance.

"Come now...did you try to steal a march on me, tempting him away while you were walking?"

His anger seemed genuine, which was proof of how highly Ragusa thought of Col.

It was hardly strange for a man of Ragusa's age to be looking for an apprentice to train to inherit his vessel. If Lawrence himself had been a bit older, he would have happily stooped to dirty tricks to ensure Col stayed with him.

"I did no such thing. I did confirm the strength of his will, though."

"Mmph." Ragusa folded his arms and grunted through his nose.

"All we can do is...try...try to leave him with a small debt of gratitude, I expect," said Lawrence through a hiccup, which the unyielding boatman laughed at grandly in the manner of his kind.

"Bwa-ha-ha! I reckon so. What shall I do? If the boy solves the copper coin puzzle, his ticket will be worth something."

"That's what he intended."

"How about it, won't you toss out a clue?" Ragusa leaned forward, speaking conspiratorially, but Lawrence only slumped over.

"Unfortunately I can't. And even if I could...he'll owe me, too, so that will settle everything."

For his part, Lawrence was compelled by the temptation to keep Col on hand, if he could.

But while he'd genuinely felt that way walking down the road with Col earlier, now he wasn't quite so sure.

It was yet early for him to be taking an apprentice, and now was not the time.

Just because he had been forced into making the preparations didn't mean he could simply hold out his hands in welcome.

Lawrence smiled ruefully to himself.

"True enough. Three chests of copper is a big difference. The only way to move a load that heavy is over water. And if it goes that way, there's no way I won't hear of it. Either that, or what's written on that paper is just wrong."

Ragusa's voice was becoming more and more slurred.

Even his huge body was beginning to succumb to drunkenness.

"That's true…I suppose. There's a story of one letter's mistake turning eel to gold coin and causing a huge uproar."

"Hmph. Might well be that way. Oh, about that, there was one interesting thing. They were searching for it for years, I heard."

"Huh…?" Lawrence was at his limit, and it felt as though his body and consciousness were farther and farther apart.

He thought he was looking toward Ragusa, but his vision was black.

He heard words as though from a great distance.

Roef. Headwaters. Lesko.

And then he thought he heard something about the bones of a hellhound.

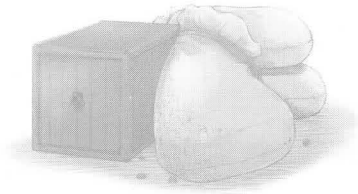
That couldn't be right.

If he was entertaining such notions, it had to be in a dream, he thought.

Or some kind of fairy tale.

But then, the thought that a fairy tale–like thing had indeed become very familiar rose up and enveloped him within the darkness of deep sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE



There was a sweetish burned smell.

Perhaps honey bread was burning.

If so, the baker responsible was making a fool of himself.

But Lawrence soon realized the smell wasn't of burning food.

He remembered the smell, along with the fire.

It was the smell of an animal.

"...Mmph."

When he opened his eyes, he saw the starry night sky above him.

A beautiful gibbous moon hung in the sky, and Lawrence felt as if he were lying underwater.

It seemed that some kind soul had put a blanket over him, and although he was fortunately not shivering from cold, his body was strangely heavy.

Wondering if it was the residual effects of the liquor, he tried to sit up—which was when he noticed.

He raised his head and peeled back the blanket.

There was Holo, sleeping comfortably, soot smudged on her forehead and cheek.

"Ah, so it was this..."

She seemed to have had quite a good time.

Her beautiful bangs had been slightly singed, and as she breathed, her breath carried the burnt smell to Lawrence's nose. Added to that was Holo's own sweet scent along with the scent of her tail, and Lawrence realized that was what he had smelled in his dream.

The sleeping Holo did not have her robe on, and her ears were exposed.

The squirrel fur had indeed fallen right next to her head, so Lawrence could see that Holo had made a vague attempt to hide her ears.

Since they weren't surrounded by adherents of the Church pointing spears at them, it seemed unlikely that Holo's secret had been discovered; Lawrence let his head fall back as he sighed.

He then took his hand off the blanket and rested it on her head.

Her ears twitched, and her even breathing stopped.

She then shivered as though sneezing and curled up more tightly.

Her arms and legs fidgeted around, and finally her face moved as she rested her chin on Lawrence's chest, then sat up.

The eyes that stared at him from under the blanket were still glazed, as though half-asleep.

"You're heavy," said Lawrence, at which Holo covered her face again and shivered. She seemed to be yawning, but her fingernails on Lawrence's chest were proof enough that she was awake.

Eventually she raised her head. "What's the matter?"

"You're heavy."

"Nay, my body is quite light. Something else must be weighing upon you."

"Shall I say then that your feelings are heavy?"

"That makes it seem like I am some sort of uninvited guest." Holo chuckled throatily, resting her cheek against Lawrence's chest.

"Honestly... So, I assume you weren't found out?"

"About whose bedroom I share, you mean?"

Lawrence murmured to himself that he wished she would be honest and say "bed."

"No, I was not found out. Everyone was too roused to notice. Heh—you should have come yourself."

"I can imagine it, more or less... but I'd rather not get burned." Lawrence fingered Holo's singed bangs, and Holo closed her eyes ticklishly. They would probably need to be trimmed back.

Before he could admonish her for excessive merrymaking, Holo spoke. "I heard much of the northlands from the traveling girl. Apparently they just finished working in Nyohhira. To hear her tell it, it hasn't changed much from the old days."

Holo opened her eyes and gazed at Lawrence's fingers, then nuzzled his chest like an affectionate cat.

But she seemed to be doing it to scrub her face free of the emotion that threatened to show there. It was clear that she struggled to restrain the emotions that welled up.

"Always so stubborn," said Lawrence, and Holo curled up.

Just like a stubborn child.

"We have time to decide what to do, though. We're chasing Eve first, after all."

Holo's pointed ears were against Lawrence's chest, so she surely noticed his chuckle.

Digging into his chest with her fingernails, Holo sniffed her objection.

"Would you get off me? I'm thirsty." Lawrence had drunk a lot.

And he didn't know whether it was the middle of the night or just a few minutes until dawn.

Holo didn't move for a moment, and Lawrence wondered if she was being malicious, but at length, she shifted and moved.

Then, straddling him like she would a horse, she tilted her

head back as though she was about to howl and yawned a great yawn.

It was a strangely captivating, untouchably divine sight, and Lawrence found himself fascinated by it.

Having satisfied her desire to bare her teeth at the moon, Holo sleepily smacked her lips a few times, then closed her mouth as she wiped the sleep from the corners of her eyes. She then smiled faintly as she looked down at Lawrence.

"Being on top does suit me, I must say."

"And I'm under you—literally, this time."

The fringes of Holo's ears were lit by the moonlight.

With their every movement, the moonbeams seemed to dance.

"I daresay, I'd like some water, myself...hmm? Where did my robe go?" Holo looked around, evidently not joking.

Lawrence choked back the words that came to mind—*What do you think is wrapped around your waist?*—and looked up at the night sky.

It was the dead of night. If this had been an abbey, the friars would have been awakening to chant the first prayers of the day.

Nonetheless, not everyone was asleep. Apart from the people curled up here and there like so many piles of cow dung, there was a circle of men sitting around the fire.

"*Eyahri*," said one of the men as he noticed Holo and raised his right hand in greeting.

Holo smiled, amused, and returned the wave.

"What's that about?" asked Lawrence.

"'Tis an old greeting. Apparently it's still in use around the vast mountains of Roef," Holo explained.

Since Lawrence was usually the one who was in a position to explain the world's customs, this made him realize just how far north they had actually come.



This was really Holo's territory now.

He remembered her profile as near the wheat fields, she had been overcome by the memories of the north to which she thought she would never return.

He wanted to put into words, to say it—*You want to stop heading for Kerube, don't you?*

But if he did, she would certainly turn angry.

After all, he didn't want her to speak those words, either.

"Ah, the boy's awake," declared Holo, interrupting Lawrence's uncharitable thoughts.

While everybody had more or less lay down and gone to sleep wherever they pleased, people seemed to be collected in a certain area—but off in one corner was a small form that seemed to be doing something.

To Lawrence's still liquor-blurred eyes, it looked like it might have been Holo.

Which meant it was Col.

"What's he doing?"

"Hmph. Looks to be writing something," said Holo.

Though he could make out the boy's outline in the moonlight, Lawrence couldn't see what Col's hands were doing—he could only see that he was looking down and doing something with what looked like a stick or branch.

Col might well have been studying with his free time.

"Anyway, water. My throat is burning."

"Mm."

Taking the water skin that Holo seemed to have gotten from somebody, Lawrence stood at the riverbank and untied its string.

It was empty, of course, and the drinking spout seemed to have been rather chewed up.

Lawrence looked at Holo, who avoided his gaze. Perhaps she liked to chew on things and had simply hid it from him thus far.

Perhaps she was worried about seeming animalistic.

No—more likely it was that such a childish habit was not something a proper wisewolf would indulge in.

Lawrence's smile was so faint that in the moonlight it was imperceptible, and he filled the water skin. The river water on this winter's night felt like just-melted ice.

"Guh..." He filled his mouth with the painfully cold water.

Lawrence could drink any amount of water after drinking so much wine.

"Come, give it here," said Holo, snatching the water skin away and drinking from it—then coughing, which was only as much as she deserved.

"So, did you hear any interesting talk?" asked Lawrence, patting Holo's back as she coughed and realizing that her movements were a bit exaggerated. *If you want me to pay attention to you, just ask,* he thought—but did not point out her lie.

"Kuh...whew...Interesting talk, you say?"

"You said you heard about Nyohhira, didn't you?"

"Mm. Nobody knew the name of Yoitsu, but many had heard of the Moon-Hunting Bear."

Since even Lawrence had heard stories of the great bear spirit, it would be stranger if people in this region did not know the tales.

It was a bear spirit whose tales had been passed down over the centuries—perhaps even the millennia.

Lawrence hesitated momentarily but eventually spoke his mind.

If Holo became angry, he would blame it on the wine.

"Does that make you jealous, I suppose?" When it came to the question of whose name had been remembered, Holo was no match for the Moon-Hunting Bear.

Of course, back in the village of Pasloe, every child knew her name, but that was on a completely different scale than the Moon-Hunting Bear.

She might feel a certain amount of competition, having come from the same era.

Just as Lawrence was thinking that no, Holo would be above such pointlessness, she replied.

"Just who do you think I am?"

Her right hand held the water skin, and her left was on her hip, her chest thrust out.

She was Holo the Wisewolf.

Lawrence cursed himself for asking a stupid question, but just as he was about to say, "Ah, you're right," Holo slipped in another statement, cutting him off.

"I'm a late bloomer, after all. I'm only just getting started." She bared her fangs and smiled. She was shameless, indeed, to have lived so many centuries and yet claiming to be only getting started.

Before she was a wisewolf, Holo was Holo.

"I may have retreated from being worshipped, but 'twould be lovely indeed to have a thick book of tales recorded about me, of course."

"Ha-ha. Shall I write it, then?"

Many merchants took up the pen.

Not having learned the finer points of composition, their writing was not beautiful, but if someone on the verge of death had a fortune, they might well have a comrade take dictation for them.

"Hmph. Though if you were to do it, the travels with you would be the larger part."

"Well, yes."

"I can't have that now, can I?"

"Why not?" asked Lawrence, and Holo coughed.

"It might well end up being less of a book and more a litany of humiliations." Holo chuckled through her nose. "You're perfectly happy to lie—you'd embellish things that did and didn't happen, no doubt. What sort of book would you create?" Holo looked up.

It was clear from her face that she had gone beyond smiling and was now playing a foolish game.

Lawrence was a merchant.

Carefully estimating her thoughts, he spoke. "Are you trying to say I'd be as thick as the book I'd write?"

Holo laughed voicelessly, her shoulders shaking, and she smacked Lawrence's arm.

It was a foolish conversation.

"Anyway, all I heard tell of was Nyohhira. They don't often go into the mountains of Roef, they said. Apparently 'tis not so nice a place."

"Huh?" Lawrence asked.

Holo was still smiling, but there was a gaping hole behind that smile.

She was stubborn.

Whenever she seemed strangely cheerful, there was always something behind it.

But she continued speaking, as though she hadn't heard Lawrence's inquiry at all.

"There are more than twenty hot springs. The earth has cracks that vent steam, and it seems like the end of the world—just like it did in my time. The one annoying bit was that the spot that I'd found and only I knew about seems to have been discovered—even though it was a hot spring hidden in a canyon so narrow I had to take this form just to fit."

It was said that the spirits of the hot springs watched those who visited, and the more effort one put forth to soak in the waters, the more effective the water's healing powers would be.

So when it came to why the people of Nyohhira would go to such lengths, it was because finding such a hot spring was part of what they lived for.

In such circumstances, it would have been discovered sooner or later.

Holo seemed exceedingly frustrated, but Lawrence could tell it was an act.

She had let something important slip.

The mountains of Roef were not a good place.

It had been carelessness.

That much was obvious.

Had the boatmen mentioned what awaited those who headed up the Roef River?

One had said that there was a mine that produced copper-like water from a spring and that there was a town with copper plentiful enough to build copper-plated stills.

And Ragusa was carrying large amounts of copper coin down the Roam River.

What was needed to make those coins?

Copper obviously—and large amounts of fuel wood or the black stone known as coal.

Holo had been talking to the troupe of performers, so if they were speaking ill of an energetic mining town, it wasn't because the town was in decline.

It might mean that the place was unfit for human habitation.

Clear-cut forests, poisoned rivers.

Floods and landslides were common, and it would attract men trying to get rich quickly.

The performer girl may have meant that the quality of the patrons was poor, but the quality of a town's population was determined by its environment.

It was even written in scripture that a bad tree would produce only bad fruit but that a good tree could produce only fine fruit.

"Heh. This won't do. At this rate, I won't be able to hide anything from you," said Holo suddenly, just as Lawrence was wondering what he should say.

"There have always been fools who dig into the mountains.

Time passes and men grow more numerous. I was prepared for that much."

Lawrence very much doubted these were her true feelings.

After so many centuries in Pasloe, Holo had to know—she had to know that the wisdom of humanity had progressed to where some now conceitedly thought they had no need for gods.

"Still, know this—," Holo said, taking careful step-hops as though crossing a creek via stepping-stones. She took one step, then another, and on the third step, she looked back at Lawrence. "This is my problem to worry over. When I see you make that face, I can't worry about it properly."

It would have been easy to simply tell her, "Why, the nerve!"

But Lawrence could hardly do so.

Holo couldn't very well help but worry, and if they found Yoitsu in ruins, she might come apart entirely.

And yet she herself understood that her concern was nothing to be ashamed about—that it was entirely natural.

Lawrence reevaluated his thoughts.

Holo was not the girl she appeared to be.

"When the time comes, I may need to borrow your chest to cry upon. That's one promise I'll need from you."

When he heard such words from a girl like Holo, Lawrence had no choice but to tell her she could rely on him.

Holo chuckled. "But then what of you? Did you hear any interesting talk?"

Led on by Holo, Lawrence started to walk, looking over at the circle of men as something in their conversation caused a stir.

"...Let's see. I seem to remember Ragusa saying something..."

Perhaps because of the state of his liquor-muddled mind when he'd talked to Ragusa, the memory did not come instantly. He tapped his head several times, annoyed at the failure of his ledger-like memory for recalling the things he'd seen and heard.

"I believe...it was something funny...but not really funny... Something like that."

"About the boy?" Holo suggested. Col was still off staring at the ground there in the moonlight.

The memory came drifting back to Lawrence.

"Oh yes! Or...was it?"

"Well, that's all you and that boatman would have to talk about, is it not? And you're competing over him, too."

"I'm not competing over anything. But Ragusa really seems to want the boy."

Lawrence had a vision of the fierce attack that would happen when they got to Kerube.

It was by no means guaranteed that the boy would safely become a high-ranking priest and that was only if he managed to finish his studies. When Lawrence thought about it that way, he felt like it might be good for Col to become Ragusa's apprentice—but that was just his own personal judgment.

Holo looked up at him as he mused.

"And what of you?"

"Me? Well, I..." Lawrence prevaricated, sidestepping Holo's sharp eyes.

He wouldn't mind taking an apprentice if it was Col.

But it felt premature, and there was another reason he was being evasive.

"Back in Pasloe, I waited a long time for a suitable-looking traveler to come, but that good meeting did not come for some time. When it comes to people, well, you should trust my eye."

Lawrence noticed that somewhere along the line, Holo had taken his hand.

"And he's gotten attached to me, but worry not. He's not likely to become your enemy."

Lawrence turned definitively away and exhaled a long, deep, white breath.

Holo snickered.

Lawrence faced ahead, exasperated, but he wasn't sure if Holo realized...

Did she realize that Lawrence was suspicious of her motivations for supporting Col?

"Well, everything seems to be in order now. When I heard that ships were piling up, I expected more of a scene."

"...You were excited, then?" asked Lawrence, and Holo looked up with a complicated expression.

She neither shook her head nor nodded.

Instead, she spoke meditatively, looking off into the distance. "I did wish for a leisurely journey, but travels with you are strangely complicated—when you've time to think of foolish plans."

Lawrence counted off the days left in his travels with Holo and remembered what had happened in their journeys.

It was true that given time, he did tend to think about things.

In that case, perhaps he might as well get caught up in mad thoughts, if only for the amusement of it.

But saying such things to Holo was going too far, Lawrence thought.

So he instead incited her easily roused anger. "It's both good and bad being too clever."

Surely Holo would say this, to which he would reply that—Lawrence constructed the exchange in his mind, but Holo said nothing at all.

When he thought it strange and looked at her, he saw her furrowed brow.

"Too clever?"

Lawrence immediately knew she was not angry.

By her expression, she simply did not understand.

Which was precisely why Lawrence could not fathom the meaning of that expression.

When he faltered and his words failed him, Holo made a small sound. "Ah—"

He felt as though that was the trigger.

Lawrence saw the source of the discrepancy.

Their gazes met.

They stopped walking simultaneously, and after a short silence, what appeared on both their faces were frowns meant to hide the awkwardness they felt.

"Don't tell me you asked around about far-off places just because you were interested, and now you've gotten some strange misapprehension in your head," said Holo.

Lawrence raised his eyebrows, at a loss for words.

Naturally, even as he hoped that his worst fears would prove baseless, he had confidence that they would be borne out.

"'Tis no wonder you made such a strange face back then. Well, you can keep your worries to yourself," said Holo forcefully.

"I could say the same thing to you. The reason you're trying to force Col off on me as my apprentice is exactly the same."

This time it was Holo who drew her chin in, chastised.

It was just as he thought.

She might have saved Col out of kindness, but her strange fawning over him and her insistence that Lawrence take him on as an apprentice was for another reason entirely.

So what happened if he applied his new knowledge that when Holo did something, it was for his own sake?

Before long, he saw that his worries about Holo were the same as hers.

They glared at each other, both trying to look firm.

"You're the weak one, and I've got to protect you," they each insisted.

It was a foolish conversation—they were both thinking the same thing.

"Honestly...so what was it you wanted to say?" said Lawrence with a little sigh, giving up on the staring match. Holo sighed as well.

"When we've time to think of foolish things, it seems neither of us can think of anything good."

"Unaware of our own faults."

Holo smiled slightly and took Lawrence's hand again. "One cannot help thinking such things, but it's still quite difficult."

"Not thinking about anything is another problem, I think...it is difficult."

And all the more so when Lawrence realized that this was the height of that joy.

The future would be darker than this. Even if they were worried about each other, if they continued to talk of these things, no cheer would come of it.

"Come, let's stop talking of this," said Holo, apparently having come to the same conclusion.

Lawrence agreed.

"Well, we've gone to the trouble of waking up at this hour," said Holo. "It's cold, so let's go talk to the lad and have some wine."

"More drinking?" said Lawrence, flabbergasted, but Holo walked ahead of him, and her only reply was the twitching of her ears underneath her hood.

"Could these people not sleep in a more orderly fashion? They are in the way; 'tis frustrating."

The sleeping figures were scattered here and there as though they had fallen at random out of the sky, and they made it hard to walk straight across the area.

Since it was still a wide riverbank, it was all right, but if it ever became a cheap lodging house, this would surely be one of the complaints.

If they had lined up nicely, they could have stretched out their legs and there would have been room for more people to sleep, but people seemed to prefer sleeping hither and thither, their arms and legs sprawled everywhere.

It was thanks to that that Lawrence didn't know how many times he'd had an inn right before his very eyes, but spent the night under the cold sky.

Such travel memories came to Lawrence, but something nagged at him.

He looked behind him at the sleeping forms of the merchants and boatmen. Their posture. Their direction. Their number.

Glared at by Holo, Lawrence found the nagging in his mind had vanished.

"Col, m'boy," said Holo.

Col seemed as attached to Holo as she was to him, and she appeared to have taken a shine to the boy.

Be it "vixen" or "bird" or "old man," Holo essentially never called people by their names.

Lawrence found himself searching his memory for any time Holo had called him by name.

It had probably happened once or twice, but when he tried to imagine the scene, it made him feel a bit embarrassed.

"Hmm?" Holo said blankly. She had called Col's name, but the boy did not seem to have taken notice.

Lawrence and Holo looked at each other, wondering if he was asleep, then approached the crouching Col.

He didn't seem asleep—he was wrapped in Holo's robe and holding a thin stick in his hand and moving.

He seemed to be totally absorbed in whatever it was he was doing.

Holo was about to call his name again, but just then, he seemed to notice their footfalls and looked over his shoulder in alarm.

"—Whoops," said Lawrence; Holo's face was blank.

Col, for his part, seemed to have been wholly absorbed in whatever he was doing. Turning to Holo and Lawrence with a look of surprise on his face, he hastily picked something up. It made a light metallic clink, so it was presumably coin. He also tried to hide something with his feet when he stood.

Holo wasn't the only quick-witted one.

Lawrence looked at the boy, whose feet hid what looked to be like writing on the ground.

Just as Lawrence was wondering what it was, Col quickly scuffed and erased it, then spoke.

"Wh-what is wrong?"

Going by the feel of Holo's hand in his, Lawrence got the feeling that Holo wanted to say, "That's my line!" He was quite sure it wasn't just his imagination.

It was obvious Col was hiding something.

"Mm. We woke up at this strange hour and thought you might drink with us."

The unpleasant face Col made was certainly not a joke.

Not long ago, Ragusa had forced the boy to drink, and Col had passed out.

Holo chuckled. "'Tis a jest. Are you hungry?"

"Er... a, a little."

Col had drawn a small circle.

It seemed he had drawn several such figures, but there was no way to know for sure.

"Mm. Come, you—," said Holo to Lawrence. "We have plenty of provisions, do we not?"

"Hmm? Oh, well, we have some, yes."

"But?"

Lawrence shrugged and answered, "But if we eat it, we'll have that much less."

Holo lightly smacked Lawrence's shoulder. "Well, that decides it, then. Now, 'twould be nicer to be near the fire…"

Between the dancing and the drunken staggering, Holo and Lawrence had forgotten where their blanket had been laid.

They both looked at Col, prompting him to ask, "Don't you remember?" in a slightly worn-out voice.

If Col was to indeed join Lawrence and Holo's travels as an apprentice, this sort of exchange seemed likely to happen every day.

Holo giggled. "We were both drunk, after all. I am sorry, but could you fetch it for us?"

"Understood," said Col and trotted off.

Lawrence and Holo watched his figure recede together, and something about the scene was far from disagreeable to him.

Part of that was of course because Holo was right next to him, but she seemed to agree and leaned lightly against him.

Lawrence knew one word to describe the scene.

But if he spoke it, he would lose.

"You—," Holo began.

"Mm?"

Holo did not immediately continue, instead shaking her head.

"Never mind."

"All right, then."

Lawrence, of course, knew what Holo was trying to say.

And yet he got the feeling he shouldn't be thinking about it.

"By the way—," said Lawrence.

"Mm?"

"Col's hometown, apparently it's called Pinu. Have you heard of it?"

Col seemed to have accidentally stepped on one of the sleeping figures in his haste.

Lawrence smiled as he watched the boy apologize and squeezed Holo's hand a bit.

"What did you just say?" Holo's voice was not her ordinary one.

Or so Lawrence thought, but when she turned to look at him, her eyes seemed to be smiling.

"Just kidding," she finished.

"...Hey."

Holo giggled. "Am I supposed to know everything now?"

She had a point, but Holo did like to pretend ignorance of important matters and treat outrageous things as if they were nothing.

If he started doubting her, there would be no end to it, but the truth was they had come far enough on this journey that making such a joke at this point was rather dubious.

Lawrence watched Holo snicker at Col's now-careful walking, and Holo sighed, not looking in Lawrence's direction.

"I suppose I shall be more temperate next time."

"...I would certainly appreciate that," said Lawrence just as Col returned.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

"Hmm? No, not especially. We were just talking about your hometown."

"I see..." came Col's tired reply; he was probably thinking that such a place wasn't interesting enough to make a good conversation topic.

Most people who had even a little bit of pride in their hometown would have jumped at the chance to talk about it.

"Pinu, was it? Does your village have any legends?"

"Legends?" Col asked as he handed over their things to Holo.

"Aye. Surely you have one or two."

"Er, well..." Perhaps he hesitated because of the suddenness of the question. Even the most meager village had many legends and superstitions.

"When you talked to me," Lawrence said, "you said it was a problem when the Church came in, didn't you? Which means that region, Pinu included, had other gods."

Hearing it explained thus, Col seemed to understand.

He nodded and spoke. "Ah, yes. Pinu is the name of a great frog god. The elder claims to have seen it with his own eyes."

"Oh ho," said Holo, her interest piqued.

The three of them sat down, with Lawrence and Holo taking the wine and giving bread and cheese to Col.

"The place the village is in now isn't where it used to be—that land vanished long ago in a great landslide and wound up at the bottom of a lake that was created in a flood, it's said. Right after that landslide, the elder—who was still a child then and helping to hunt fox in the mountains—apparently saw it. The great frog was blocking the floodwaters from flowing down the valley that led directly to the village."

Stories of gods that protected villages from great disasters existed all over.

The Church was busily trying to rewrite them all to feature its own God, but looking at Col's shining eyes, that task seemed as though it would hardly go well.

Stories of gods and spirits were not mere fairy tales.

If the stories were even now still trusted, the Church's efforts were pointless.

"So Lord Pinu blocked the floodwaters, and as he held them back, the elders came down the mountain and ran to the village to warn everyone, who barely escaped with their lives."

Once Col had finished the telling, he seemed to realize he had gotten a bit excited.

He looked around, wondering if his voice had been too loud.

"Hmm. So your god was a mere frog, then. What of, say, wolves?" Holo couldn't help herself apparently.

Thus asked, Col's answer was quick. "Oh yes, there are many."

Holo nearly dropped the jerky she had taken out of the sack, but she managed to feign composure as she put it in her mouth.

Lawrence pretended not to notice her trembling hand.

"But there are more of those in Rupi. I told Master Lawrence of that place—it's where the skilled fox and owl hunters are."

"Ah, the village that the Church marched into, yes?"

Col nodded with a rueful grin, because it was that event that had been the cause of Col's journey in the first place.

"There is a legend that says that the ancestor of Rupi's people was a wolf."

The part of the jerky that stuck out of Holo's mouth twitched impressively.

Lawrence was impressed she hadn't dropped it.

But then he thought back to the pagan town of Kumersun, where he'd talked to Diana the chronicler woman.

She had spoken of a human and a god becoming mates.

He had asked for Holo, who was terrified of loneliness, but now this all took on a slightly different meaning.

As Lawrence hoped he wouldn't be teased too much by Holo for this, Col continued. "This is just talk I heard later, but apparently the Church men who came to Rupi originally had that wolf-god as their goal."

"The... god?"

"Yes. But there are no gods in Rupi. According to the stories, they died."

Lawrence didn't understand.

If the legend held that the gods were dead, it was strange that the Church would come looking for them. It would have made more sense for the Church to have come because the gods were dead, as that would make the propagation of its teachings easier.

And the high priest that also served as the Church troop's commander had pulled out of the area when his health failed.

It was a strangely halfhearted engagement.

It almost sounded like the Church had only come in search of something.

That was when Lawrence realized.

The men of the Church had come looking for something—they had, all the way out to a remote village, whose god had already died.

"Long ago, the story has it that the god of Rupi returned to the village after being terribly injured, then died there. As thanks, it left its right foreleg and its offspring there. Its offspring were accepted into the village, and it's said that the right foreleg protected the whole area from plagues and disasters. And the Church men were looking for that foreleg or some such."

Col's relating of the story made it sound like a fairy tale; he did not seem to really believe it himself.

It was not uncommon for people to consider their home village's legends rather banal after having traveled and seen some of the breadth of the world, even if they'd never doubted those stories before.

"That is what they say, but our village fell into a lake after a landslide, so it's a bit doubtful whether the god of Pinu really left its leg there," Col said with a smile.

Having been outside and gained some wisdom, it was natural that he would see the discrepancy between legends and what happened in reality.

Such experiences would serve only to shake his faith, the stories passed down in his village.

But Lawrence was the opposite.

Thanks to Holo, he now knew that such stories were no mere fairy tales.

And it was his nature as a merchant to try to incorporate this information with what he already knew.

It was enough to call up a vague and fuzzy memory.

Something he had heard from Ragusa, just before passing out drunk.

He knew full well that it was an arbitrary conclusion.

And yet, it fit perfectly.

"So, do you doubt the legends?"

Holo immediately sensed the strange atmosphere and looked dubiously out from beneath her hood.

The boy smiled slightly. "...If you mean do I not fully believe, then yes, I doubt them. But in school, I learned a lot about reconciling the existence of gods. So it's simple. The foreleg of Rupi's god would decades ago have been..."

Col had had many experiences in his school in the south, then thinking of returning home, had found himself in this area.

Without question, it would be normal to collect stories about one's home.

Which meant that it would not be strange if Col had collected the same information as Lawrence.

The big difference between Col and Lawrence was whether or not they believed in the preposterous tales.

Lawrence did not venture to look at Holo, only taking her hand. "Treasure maps appear only once the treasure has already been stolen."

Col's eyes widened.

Then they narrowed as he smiled with faint embarrassment.

"I won't be fooled again," his face said. "Still, that can't be, can it? Buying and selling the foreleg of a god, I mean."

"—"

The sound of Holo breathing in.

It seemed Col did indeed have the same information as Lawrence.

Holo's hand gripped his very tightly.

In place of speech, Holo gave him a look, but Lawrence did not return it.

"Yes. The world is full of frauds and fakes."

Lesko, the town at the headwaters of the Roef River. The trading firm there had been looking for the fossilized foreleg of a wolf-god.

Based on the information Lawrence had gotten from Ragusa over drinks, it was certainly a rumor that was circulating among the boatmen.

And if Col, who'd been living on the road, had heard it, it was likely a topic of discussion at inns and taverns that attracted travelers.

The saying was "where there's smoke, there's fire," but it made more sense to ascribe the rumor to the pagan culture that suffused the northlands.

In his seven years as a traveling merchant, Lawrence had heard such tales more than a few times.

The remains of saints, the wings of angels, miraculous chalices, even the robes of God.

And they were all laughably absurd fakes.

"Um, I really don't believe any of this, you know." Col seemed to think that Lawrence's and especially Holo's silence was due to their being shocked at his naiveté. "I mean, of course I think I'd like to know for sure if it is true, but..."

His lonely smile as he said this was like that of a child who has realized the trick behind a sleight of hand.

How would he react if he knew that before his very eyes was a living relative of that same god?

Lawrence couldn't help but wonder.

But when he considered whether Holo would want to show Col her true form, he couldn't imagine it was so.

She instead looked at Col with terribly calm eyes.

"Still, if the Church really is chasing after that bone, what could they be thinking, I wonder?" said Lawrence to Holo, bringing her into the conversation.

He had noticed Holo's state, but given the topic, she must have some thoughts on the matter, he reasoned.

"What are they... thinking?"

"Right. I mean, if they're trying to find that bone because it's genuine, that would confirm the existence of the pagan gods. Surely they won't do that."

"That's true...," murmured Col, his face blank. "Now that you mention it, that is strange."

If it was real, the bone was surely from a wolf like Holo, so its size would be far from ordinary.

Lawrence's memory was a bit hazy, but he seemed to remember Ragusa saying something about a hellhound.

When they found the bone, perhaps they would simply call it something like that and make a religious proclamation of it.

If it had been a martyred saint, Lawrence could think of any number of ways to use them.

Just as Lawrence was thinking it over, Col raised his voice uncertainly.

"Ah, er, maybe—"

Lawrence looked at the boy; perhaps he had hit upon something. But just then, the circle of men around the fire cried out in laughter; evidently something had been funny.

And the next moment—

Krakk—there was the sound of something breaking.

For a second, he suspected Holo and her ill temper.

When he cast his gaze at her, Holo was a bit surprised but met his eyes and seemed to have understood Lawrence's immediate reaction.

She smacked his shoulder.

"Wh-what was that...?" Col murmured, terrified despite having only just declared his skepticism over the existence of gods.

Perhaps the conversation had gotten to him.

Religious faith is not so easily lost—Holo seemed pleased to see this and looked about to laugh.

There was no sound for a moment after that, and the men around the fire, having all got to their feet, began to sit back down, and a few of them looked at Lawrence and the rest and shrugged.

What had it been? Everyone wondered the same thing. And then—

Again—*krak, kreak*—the breaking sounds continued, now noticeably louder, as though something was splintering.

The river.

Just when the thought hit Lawrence, there came the sound of creaking lumber and then a great and audible splash.

Col got to his feet.

Lawrence was on one knee as he looked at the river.

"The boats!" cried the men who'd been drinking around the fire.

His gaze soon slipped to the river's surface.

What he saw was the gallant form of a large ship as there in the moonlight it seemed to be making its departure.

"Ahoy! Somebody—!"

The men who had been drinking around the fire all shot to their feet, but not a one of them took action.

Perhaps they were all merchants and travelers. Lawrence also stood, and Col started to run, but after taking three or four steps, he realized he didn't know what action he would actually take and stopped short.

It was clear that the boat was about to float down the river, and it was equally clear that it had to be stopped.

But Lawrence didn't know how.

Just then, a voice called out.

"Protect the ship!"

At the sound of that voice, the boatmen who had been sleeping scattered about like so much cow dung now jumped to their feet.

All of them ran for the river, as though having dealt with this sort of thing more than a few times.

Despite having been drunk not long ago, most of the boatmen's strides were steady and confident.

The first among them to reach the boats moored at the river's edge were Ragusa and another man.

They strode directly into the water, raising a splash, pushing against the hull with ox-like strength.

Ragusa boarded first, followed by the other man.

Shortly behind them, the rest took the next best course of action, jumping into the river with a moment's hesitation and swimming toward the anchored boats.

The big ship was slowly but surely being pushed over the other, sunken vessel and would soon be swept downstream.

The sunken hulk, after so many attempts by Lawrence and the rest to haul it ashore, must have grown fragile and given way.

And now it was being crushed under the other ship's weight.

If the ship was swept away, it would almost certainly run aground at the next meander or sandbar.

And there would be other vessels anchored farther downstream, as well.

If a smaller boat happened to be struck, even a child could tell you what would happen.

But the reason the boatmen plunged into the crisis like well-trained knights seemed less for fear of the actual consequences and more to simply protect their good names as boatmen. If they let the same ship run aground twice, it would destroy their reputations.

Col took another two or three steps, perhaps drawn forth by Ragusa's bravery.

Lawrence gulped as he watched the developing situation.

After all, the ship was one that required four or five rowers. He didn't think it would be easily stopped.

But unlike the rest of the onlookers, Lawrence was not simply staring at the sight.

Next to him was Holo, who murmured, "Do you really not understand?"

"Huh?"

For a moment, he thought she was talking about the ship, but then he realized that wasn't it—she was referring to the reason the Church was searching for those bones.

"Do you understand?" he asked back.

A cry went out.

When he looked, he saw that Ragusa had with admirable skill managed to get his boat alongside the runaway ship, and the other boatman had jumped aboard the larger vessel and taken up its pole.

But it did not seem like it would stop. In the moonlight, that pole seemed impossibly thin and fragile.

He thought he could hear Ragusa's nervously clicking tongue.

"I do understand, in fact," replied Holo. "Just as you live by traveling and selling, I lived on the people's faith." Her sharp words were the proof of her displeasure.

Lawrence didn't know why she was angry.

But he knew that her anger had something to do with the Church.

"The reason I so hated being called a god was the way people kept me at a distance, gazing on me from afar. They feared, respected, and were grateful for my slightest move. I was treated with constant and terrible caution. So if you consider the opposite of that…"

"No!" someone called out.

Ragusa's boat had circled ahead of the ship. If the boatmen tried to encircle the ship and stop it that way, they could easily wind up sinking themselves.

There was the dull sound of hull hitting hull. All who watched the scene held their breath, fists clenched tight.

Ragusa's boat rocked violently. Surely it would capsize at any moment. Despite the tense atmosphere on the shore, Lawrence looked back at Holo.

He understood what she was trying to say.

"Surely that bone, they won't—"

Then came the sound of a great wave crashing.

After several moments that seemed like an eternity, the ship visibly slowed and seemed to come to a stop.

It was safe for the nonce.

The realization spread, along with a great cheer.

Aboard the ship, Ragusa raised both hands in triumph.

Yet Lawrence could take no pleasure in it.

His mouth was filled with the vulgarity of the Church's actions.

"That's right. Suppose they find a bone they know is real, then crush it under their foot? We can't simply devour the fools until we're bones ourselves. We'll have to content ourselves with being subjugated. There will be no miracles. And what will the people who see us think? They'll think this—"

Soon the trailing boats caught up with the big ship, and several more boatmen climbed aboard and tossed ropes out.

Lawrence felt he was witnessing the indescribable solidarity of men who worked together.

He longed to be among their sudden celebration.

"—They'll think, 'Oh, look at this thing we so used to fear—'tis not such a great thing, after all.'"

It would be a more effective demonstration of the greatness of the Church's god than ten thousand words of sermon.

Lawrence found himself impressed at the calculation of this—only the Church, having fought the pagans for centuries, would consider such a thing.

But that bone might well have belonged to someone Holo knew—in the worst case, even a relative.

And this was Holo, who found herself conflicted by the fur trade.

But there was a difference between trading in fur and symbolically crushing this bone.

Her eyes quivered not because she wanted to weep, but rather out of rage.

"So, what think you?" she asked.

There amid the sounds of drums and flutes, Ragusa and his comrades tied the boats together with practiced motions, setting about the task of mooring them once again.

Each man was skilled enough that no conscious thought was required and performed his task with logical ease.

The Church was just as practiced in the manipulation of faith.

They would use whatever tools they had to spread it.

"I think—I think it's awful…," said Lawrence

"Fool," said Holo, stepping on his foot.

The pain he felt told him just how angry Holo was.

"I'm not asking you of the morality of this. You're just like the Ch—"

Holo stopped herself short, but before she could apologize, Lawrence stepped on her foot, his face serious and inclined just so.

"That's payback," his expression said.

Holo bit her lip before continuing, partially to calm herself and partially out of frustration at her own verbal misstep. "…What I mean is, what do you think of the story that they're after the bone? Do you think it is true?"

"Half and half."

Holo looked at him, pained perhaps at the shortness of his answer.

She might have been regretting making him angry for no good reason.

"I mean, my immediate guess is half and half. Stories like this are common as the way Col was deceived during his studies." Lawrence motioned with his chin at Col.

Col, along with the rest of the onlookers, was cheering Ragusa and the other boatmen.

His innocent figure looked not dissimilar to Holo's, as he was still wearing her robe.

"Well, it's hardly half and half, then, is it?" said Holo.

"Yes, but I know that beings like you exist. That eliminates the possibility of the most common idle gossip. So, half and half. That it's a rumor at all is because there's a trading firm involved. Whether it's really in Rupi, we don't know. That the Church came to Rupi is only true so long as Col isn't lying."

Ragusa and the other boatmen's labors seemed to have concluded.

They all piled aboard Ragusa's boat with a few energetic ones diving into the water and swimming ashore.

The remaining wood was lavishly thrown on the dwindling fire and wine toward the returned heroes.

"What say you to this—?"

"Mm?"

Holo's hand entwined with Lawrence's.

She seemed to think that putting on a show of teasing him was necessary when she had a favor to ask.

"Let us continue our easy travels, and when we find Yoitsu, say our good-byes. What think you?"

Lawrence had to laugh at how easily she broached the subject.

Holo dug her fingernails angrily into his hand.

This was going just a bit too far.

When she was so frank about it, he couldn't very well accuse her of not being honest.

Lawrence took a deep breath, then exhaled. "Don't ask me a thing like that. What did I say when I came to pick you up?"

Holo looked away and did not answer.

Unbelievably, she seemed shy.

"There is the salvation that it may all turn out to be a mere rumor. If it's captured your interest, I don't mind."

"And what if there is no such salvation?" She was not called a wisewolf for nothing.

Words were her playthings.

Lawrence lightened his tone still further. "If it's true, we won't come away unscathed."

"Because of my anger?"

Lawrence closed his eyes.

The moment he opened them, he saw the excited Col looking back at them. The boy seemed to notice their strangely subdued state.

He hastily looked ahead, as though having seen something he knew he shouldn't have.

"Such items are unbelievably highly priced as a rule. The Church often brings its authority to bear in such matters, as well."

He looked at Holo next to him.

Lawrence knew that Col was looking at them over his shoulder.

But he didn't particularly care.

"Despite your morals, it's a valuable item that affects the Church's credibility. If we get involved, we won't come away from it unhurt."

Holo smiled, bringing her free hand up to chest level and waving.

Lawrence saw Col hastily look away.

Holo slowly lowered her hand.

"To come out and just say it, I'm going digging for bones. I won't force you to come along."

Now she was being unfair.

Lawrence brought his free hand up and smacked Holo's head lightly. "Unlike you, I'd prefer our book to be a long one."

"...In truth?"

While the idea of the journey ending by growing old and passing in his sleep had a certain appeal, there was something that was quite painful for him.

And it was all the more so when the encounters and travels had been so eventful.

Why did people gather to celebrate and dance at the end of the year or at the harvest?

Lawrence felt like he understood now.

"Stories are better when they have an ending, are they not?"

"Even if there's danger?"

Lawrence shook his head.

He was no wild youth, after all.

"Of course, I'd prefer to avoid danger if possible."

Holo grinned triumphantly. "I'm Holo the Wisewolf!"

It was a foolish thing, he thought.

If there really was a trading company searching for the bone and the Church was truly after it, then it was not something an individual merchant could hope to affect.

And yet, Lawrence thought.

His travels with Holo would not be some weakly strained paste that left the stomach empty and grumbling. They had to be like beef, thickly cut and smeared generously with spices.

Holo smiled softly and walked ahead.

She tapped the eavesdropping Col on his head, then walked with him toward Ragusa and the rest.

Lawrence followed slowly after them.

The moon hung there in the sky, and the pleasantly cold air stirred at the hearty laughing of the boatmen.

The turning point of their journey was a lovely night, indeed.

Lawrence took a deep breath.

Though Holo might be angry to find out, he did not much care whether the tale was true.

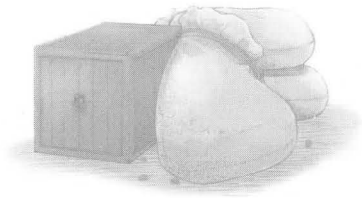
There was something more important than that.

"..."

For having found a reason to continue forward, he wanted to thank the moon.



EPILOGUE



Early morning.

Lawrence awoke when the light touched his cheek, the moment the sun showed its face above the horizon.

At least, that's what it felt like, but when he opened his eyes, he realized that what was actually touching his face was Holo's breathing as she slept.

The sleeping Holo, curled up in the blanket, would occasionally pop her head out from under it, perhaps coming up for breath.

When Lawrence looked at her, her cheek was a bit damp, proof that she had emerged from the blanket only a moment ago.

It was like uncooked bread dough.

Particularly in the way it would flare up at a moment's notice.

But was it his imagination that her sleeping face looked even more innocent than it normally did?

She didn't just look relaxed—her face conveyed a certain self-confidence, as though she wouldn't possibly be having any bad dreams. Even her singed bangs seemed like a badge of honor, as though she were a brave knight that had fearlessly returned from a blazing castle.

No—that was going a bit too far.

Lawrence grinned at his folly, then yawned. His dry, cold skin complained loudly, and his eyes opened with a sensation like a membrane of ice cracking.

Today would be another clear day.

Eventually Holo's face twitched, her eyes still closed, and she squirmed around underneath the blanket.

After the ship had been stopped from being washed downriver, there was talk of having an all-night celebration, but the boatmen knew their jobs too well.

Drinking all night long and then piloting boats downriver the next day was too great a danger.

They indulged in just a bit of merrymaking before going to bed, without even time enough for their clothes to dry.

Since there were so many furs that had been brought ashore, even with wet clothes there were no worries of being warm enough to sleep soundly.

A few of the biggest and strongest men had stripped naked and surrounded themselves with furs in order to keep warm most efficiently; their sleeping forms were a sight to behold. Holo's words ("I don't quite know what to make of that sight") were most apt.

Those same men were not yet awake, and Lawrence realized that at the moment, he was the only one up.

No one would wake up because of the cold, and it wasn't as though they had napped the previous day on the river.

This sensation had lasted but a few days, but it made Lawrence feel very nostalgic.

The days when he'd done business all day long, holding each spare moment precious.

It felt the same as those days.

When the breaking dawn meant a new opportunity for profit, if life was a gamble, then dawn was another card.

Another card. Another. And another.

Even if there was no progress, that was fun, too.

It felt the same as those days.

Had he woken feeling this way before, since the reality of the end of his travels with Holo had begun to sink in? Had he not been afraid of dawn's break?

Though he knew well that with a journey came parting, that didn't make it any easier. He doubted even Holo the Wisewolf could restrain that feeling.

So could he, a mere human, hope to?

And then, there came this first pleasant waking in some time. But he knew the reason.

In Lenos, they had declared their intention to end their travels with a smile.

Last night they had decided how they would reach that goal.

They would continue this carefree travel, and then at Yoitsu, it would be "fare thee well." "What think you?" Holo had said.

For the merchant who dedicated his days to profit and the ferocious wolf, "carefree travel" was an impossibility.

Which made him as excited as a child.

Even though he had no idea if the story was true. And if it was true, the probability that it would lead to a painful outcome for Holo was very high.

And yet Lawrence did not think it was imprudent.

After all—

"Mmchoo—"

Lawrence heard a sneeze from under the blanket.

When conducting negotiations in a cramped inn, one had to be careful that the people sleeping nearby were truly sleeping and not feigning sleep in order to eavesdrop.

Sneezes and coughs and the sounds of swallowing—all were proof that someone was awake.

Lawrence peeled the blanket back to see Holo rubbing her nose.

She soon noticed him and turned her gaze toward him. Her eyes were not drowsy the way they typically were.

"Mmph... 'Tis the first pleasant awakening in some time."

After all—

Lawrence thought Holo felt the same way he did.

"So you're really going, eh?"

The sun was now fully risen, and the area buzzed with activity as the boatmen readied for departure.

Ragusa left his own boat in the care of a fellow boatman and strode about cockily, arms folded, watching the proceedings.

The boatmen congratulated each other on their heroic deeds in saving the ship the night before, as was apparently their custom.

But even Ragusa's heroic manner, as though he were the true hero of the night, fell apart when Lawrence informed him of their intention to end their downriver journey here and return to Lenos.

"I-I know we were delayed a night here, but it'll be an express trip the rest of the way! We'll make up the delay in no time!" he said insistently.

But Lawrence only answered with reason. "No, Kerube was a bit too far out of our way to begin with. Having had a night to think it over, we've decided to head back."

"Urgh... right, then. It's a mark on my reputation as a boatman, but... I suppose there's nothing for it."

Ragusa wouldn't have looked this upset even if he'd lost his coin purse—so Lawrence started to feel bad for lying to him.

The truth was, Lawrence and company were not returning to Lenos at all, but were planning to get to Kerube one step ahead of the rest.

The reason Lawrence went to the trouble of lying to get off the

boat was that their method of arriving there was not something he could explain to just anyone.

"I imagine that we can make it back within a day—and of course, my first voyage in quite some time was excellent."

Ragusa smiled ruefully at the obvious idle chatter in the midst of a business negotiation, then sighed.

His acceptance was very boatman-like.

"Ah, well. For every meeting, there is a parting. I'm a boatman that connects towns. No doubt I'll have a chance to carry the same travelers again," said Ragusa, offering his hand.

Lawrence had shaken hands with the man when he'd boarded and now shook hands to leave.

Voyages like this put them quite literally in the same boat.

And the man responsible for Lawrence's life was nearly a friend.

"Indeed. I am a traveling merchant, after all. I'm sure I'll come this way again," Lawrence said, taking the man's thick hand in his.

"Right then. Tote Col—mind you well the things I've taught you."

"Wha—? Oh! Y-yes sir!" said Col hastily; he had been standing next to Lawrence, nodding off.

Previously Col had been set to work in Ragusa's boat, standing watch in case another vessel was swept away.

Evidently he'd been angling for some money.

Seeing this, Lawrence couldn't help but soften his expression. Ragusa had secretly given Col's wages—and they were generous wages—to Lawrence, with instructions to give them to Col once they'd reached Kerube. Col wouldn't worry about food for a week.

"Incidentally, Mr. Ragusa."

"Mm?"

"No stealing a march on me now," warned Lawrence, and Ragusa laughed hugely.

There was no doubt Ragusa would have tried to tempt the lad into his service by the time they got to Kerube.

Col had his own goals.

But if Ragusa twisted his arm enough, Col might find himself nodding his agreement. It might not have been any of his business, but Lawrence wanted to help the boy accomplish his own goals.

Thus, his words to Ragusa.

The redoubtable boatman heaved an amused sigh. "Fine then. I promise. I'm a boatman—I won't tell a lie."

Each traveler had his or her own reasons for their journey.

Ragusa surely understood that better than anyone.

The men held each other's gazes and chuckled.

Lawrence could understand the feeling of having let the big fish that was Col get away, though it was yet too soon for Lawrence to be considering taking the boy as his own apprentice.

"Still—," said Ragusa, grabbing Lawrence's shoulder suddenly and pulling him close. "You won't go quarreling with your companion over anything quite that foolish again, will you now?"

He meant Holo.

Lawrence glanced over at her, moving only his eyes. She grinned at him from underneath her hood.

As he brought his gaze back around, he glimpsed Col giving him a sympathetic smile, which was even worse.

"I know, I know. I won't."

"Mark my words—you can't buy love with gold. Your merchant's common sense won't work there. Don't forget that!"

It was a teeth-grindingly tiresome thing to hear.

But also true.

"I'll carve it on my heart," said Lawrence, and only then did Ragusa release him, as if to say, "Well, that's all right then."

Ragusa's face was now bright and cheerful as he refolded his arms, as though his sadness from a moment ago had been a lie.

There with his chest thrust out, he was every inch a boatman.

Lawrence let himself wonder for a moment if in ten or fifteen years he, too, would have this sort of presence.

But piling any more words up now would have made this act of their travels a bit dull.

He took Holo's hand, at which she nodded, her expression composed.

"Well then, we'll be off," said Lawrence.

"Uh, wait—!"

At Col's call, the pair looked back.

For just a moment, Lawrence considered that if Col were to ask to become his apprentice right there, he would be genuinely conflicted.

Col stammered there for a moment, as though unsure why he had called out. But then he said simply, "Thank you for everything!"

Col, who had called out "Master!" at their first meeting.

His manner just then was as though he was a true apprentice—the truth within the lie.

"Good luck to you," said Lawrence, and he and Holo began walking.

Several times he was tempted to turn around and look, but in the end, he did not.

The reason why was obvious.

Next to him, Holo seemed like she wanted to turn and look even more.

"So we'll head down along the river and get to whatever this port town is, and then what?" asked Holo, looking ahead with unnatural determination.

"Mm, once we get to Kerube, we'll catch Eve."

They had discussed it the previous night. There was no need to reconfirm the plan, but Holo probably wanted to change the subject from Col.

"So we'll catch the vixen, and in exchange for her profits, we'll make her tell us what she knows."

"She conspired with the Church to smuggle goods, so if it's about towns along this river, she should have all the inside information."

"Hmph. So long as we get even with her, any reason will do."

Lawrence chuckled; that one statement was not necessarily a lie.

He would have to be very careful that they didn't get into a fight.

"But still, 'tis sometimes nice to take my wolf form and run 'neath the sun's rays. My legs can easily overtake any ship, no matter how far a lead it might have."

This was the reason they had gotten off Ragusa's boat.

It would no longer be fast enough to catch up with Eve.

But since catching a horse would be even more impossible, this was the only other way.

"Then, once we've strong-armed whatever that company was called, we'll come back up the river to the town from yesterday. And after that?"

"The Jean Company, yes. And we're not going to strong-arm them. We don't have the resources for that. I just want to put out some feelers. And after that..." Lawrence looked far off into the distance, then back at Holo. "We'll decide when we get there."

Holo knitted her brow at this, but this alone could not be helped.

What Holo truly hated was that the conversation would end here.

"Always so stubborn," said Lawrence with a smile.

"Who's stubborn?" asked the stubborn Holo.

She was apparently determined to feign ignorance.

Instead of challenging her on it, Lawrence decided to get right to the point. "It looked like you wanted to bring Col along."

Holo's lips visibly curled into a sneer. "I was only trying to bring him over so that when I leave, you wouldn't be too lonely. If you've no use for him, there's no need, is there?" she shot back, her speech rapid-fire.

It had actually been a simple explanation, free of emotion.

But Lawrence said nothing and just looked at Holo.

He knew that she understood well enough herself.

As he expected, eventually she could take it no longer, and she finally spoke.

"You've gotten rather tough."

Her expression was hardly one he would expect a compliment to come from, but he took it as a compliment nonetheless.

Holo seemed to resign herself. "I don't remember when it was, but once I met a boy and girl about his age on my travels," she said, exasperated.

"Oh?"

"The pair were like baby chicks and didn't know right from left. Nothing is more dangerous than such ignorance. I cared for them for a while, traveling with them. It was rather fun, in truth. This makes me think of that."

No doubt she meant it.

But the truth of something was not everything.

"Also, I simply like the boy," confessed Holo flatly. "Is that enough for you?"

She looked up at Lawrence through narrowed eyes.

"Would you really turn jealous of a child like that?" her impatient eyes demanded.

"I wish I could say, 'Right then, let's bring him along,' of course—" Lawrence shrugged. "But I can't."

"I'll just bet."

One reason was because he was about to approach some dangerous business dealings.

Another reason was that it would make hiding Holo's true identity continuously difficult.

And the last reason—

"What's the last reason?" it was Holo's turn to ask.

If he didn't spit it out, she'd tear his throat out.

"I like traveling with just us two."

But there was no longer any stubbornness or embarrassment in saying so.

Therefore, it was not something Holo would tease him about.

It was hasty to believe that familiarity bred contempt.

At Lawrence's words, Holo's expression suggested that she understood, and her hand squirmed a little ticklishly in his.

"I guessed the reasons were something like those, yes. And also—"

"Also?"

"You said it when we first met him, did you not? That if he wouldn't seek his own salvation, you wouldn't venture to help him."

Which meant that if Col didn't ask to come along, Lawrence wouldn't offer.

Lawrence was about to reply, but stopped.

He thought of Col, stumbling over his words as they parted.

Surely he had been about to ask to be taken along.

Col surely had overheard Lawrence and Holo's conversation about the wolf-god's bones.

And if so, then he could hardly fail to take interest—having himself come from a village not so very far from Yoitsu.

If Lawrence intended to verify the truth of the stories, Col might well wish to know.

It was entirely plausible.

But when he had become tongue-tied, the reason it had tortured him so was no doubt because logic told him to return to school as quickly as possible.

Lawrence was sure this was true. "Well, even if he'd asked to come along on our travels, I would have refused."

Holo was about to protest that that wasn't what he'd promised, but without some selectivity, she would be in trouble.

"Now if he'd said, 'If you turn me down, I'm prepared to die,' I might think about it."

"So you're saying you don't want anybody interfering with the two of us for less than that, then?"

A short pause.

"Fine, fine."

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"I did not."

Though their words seemed meant to drive each other away, the two continued to hold hands as they walked.

Lawrence, of course, understood that Holo had unilaterally decided to get close.

As for what Holo was thinking—it went without saying.

"Well then, do you think we can safely stray from the road now?"

Even if they were to look behind them, Ragusa and Col were out of sight.

The Roam River flowed silently beside them, and no one was around.

If they were to walk at a right angle to the river, they would be in the middle of vast plains. And there, Holo could become a wolf unwatched by human eyes.

Fixing his grip on Holo's hand, Lawrence started to head into the unpopulated wilderness.

And then—

"What's wrong?"

Holo had stopped.

He looked back at her, assuming she was playing at something, but she was looking dumbly back down the river.

"Is there something there?"

Lawrence felt a faint premonition.

And it must be said, a certain anticipation.

Near a town was one thing, but farther out than that, and these roads were near deserted come early morning.

Yet Lawrence saw a single figure running toward them up the road.

Still and silent, he stole a glance at Holo's face as she watched the figure and sighed, amused. "You certainly do like children."

Holo's ears twitched.

To Lawrence's faint surprise, it was close to the same twitch she used when he'd made a verbal slip.

What did he say wrong? Lawrence thought it over and could think of nothing.

Without looking at him, Holo spoke. "And what if I were to answer that I do like children—what would you do then?"

It was a strange question.

"What would I do? I don't suppose I'd do any—ah..."

He had unconsciously let go of Holo's hand, but Holo would hardly let him escape.

She snatched his hand up as though she were a cat catching a butterfly and pulled him back in.

Beneath her hood she wore a combative smile.

"I do like children, don't I? Do I not?"

"Urgh..." Lawrence cursed his careless choice of words.

"Hmm? What's that?" Holo's tail flicked rapidly.

Lawrence could think of no objections or retorts.

The only thing to do would be to change the subject by force.

Just then, Holo gave up her attack. "Ah, well, I am the one who came to travel with you, after all. I'll leave such decisions in your hands," she said, stepping away from him.

Lawrence had a nervous sweat on his back—but the figure's identity went without saying.

Col was heading toward them.

And he had hardly been sent to deliver some forgotten article.

Lawrence cleared his throat, trying to clear his verbal failure from a moment before.

From Holo's chuckling, there would be no further pursuit.

"Well, if we wind up traveling together, you're not going to be able to groom yourself as you please," said Lawrence.

Holo gave a great sigh; it was not a joke, and Lawrence winced.

"Males always think themselves special," she said.

"..."

"Think of where he's from. I suppose we'll just have to see whether or not he finds my form terrifying."

Lawrence did not reply to those words, as Holo's face was suddenly timid.

Unlike the Church, which would hunt her down as being demon possessed, a person from the northlands might simply fall prostrate before her.

Having gotten along so well with Col, Holo certainly would have hurt feelings if she received such treatment from the boy.

"Well, we'll hear his reason and decide from there," said Lawrence lightly.

Holo nodded, and it was but a moment later that Lawrence was able to finally hear Col's footsteps as he ran up the road.

Col seemed to be running with all his might, and when he got within earshot of Lawrence and Holo, he abruptly slowed his pace; then, looking as if he might collapse, he stopped entirely.

He did not come any closer.

He was close enough for his voice to carry.

Lawrence said nothing.

Those who wanted something had to knock upon the door.

"Um!" Col managed to shout, his breath ragged.

He'd cleared the first barrier.

"Did I forget something?" Lawrence asked, playing dumb.

Col bit his lower lip.

He was surely anticipating being refused.

Children always assume that adults will fulfill their every request.

He'd cleared the second barrier.

Col shook his head.

"I-I have a favor to ask."

Beside Lawrence, Holo stirred, perhaps trying to hide her face beneath the hood.

If Holo's caring for the boy hadn't been a strategy to get Lawrence to take him as an apprentice, then she probably couldn't stand to see him walk this tightrope.

But Col cleared the third barrier easily.

It took a lot of courage to ask what one knew would be refused.

"What might that be? If it's traveling expenses, I can't help you," Lawrence said.

Col's eyes did not waver at the deliberate jab.

Lawrence wanted to just say "sure" for once.

If the rest went like his usual business, he would be able to readily agree.

"N-no, it's not that. I just—"

"You just?" Lawrence asked, and Col looked at the ground for a moment, then balled up his fists and looked back up.

"You're going to go see the truth about the wolf of Rupi, aren't

you? Please take me with you! Please!" Col said and took a step forward.

Col was hardly going to steal from them in the night, and his character was perfect for an apprentice.

But that was exactly why Lawrence wanted him to be able to pursue his own goals.

After all, he could not guarantee that his travels with Holo would henceforth bear much fruit.

They were searching for the truth behind a dangerous rumor.

"You may not make any money," warned Lawrence. "And there may be danger. And the rumor might turn out to be a barefaced lie."

"I don't mind if it's a lie! I can put myself at ease. And I'm fine with danger. If it wasn't for you, I would have died alongside this river!" said Col, swallowing hard.

No doubt he'd gotten thirsty, dashing up this cold, dry length of road.

Which was why when Col dropped his threadbare burlap sack, Lawrence assumed it was to get a drink of water.

He soon realized that was not it.

"I can return the money I received, I think. And—" He thrust his hand into the bag, then pulled it out.

His small hand held something tightly.

"P-please!"

"You can't go back to Mr. Ragusa's boat now."

At Lawrence's words, something like a tearful smile appeared on Col's face.

In Col's hand was a red copper coin.

Lawrence didn't have to look closely to know—it was a newly minted *eni*.

The boy was determined.

Col looked straight at Lawrence.

"..."

Lawrence let go of Holo's hand and scratched his head.

Col had gotten this far; there was no reason to refuse.

No matter how prepared he might be, just thinking about it, Lawrence could hardly turn him down.

For reasons all his own, Col had come all the way south to Aquent to study, been kicked out, then wandered the land.

And he'd never wavered, Lawrence knew.

Lawrence looked at Holo.

"Are your tests quite finished?" her eyes demanded.

"Fine, fine!" said Lawrence, as though out of patience, and Col's face broke into a huge smile, and he clasped his chest and slumped in relief at having made it across the tightrope.

"However—," Lawrence continued, and the boy winced. "If you're going to travel with us, there is something you should know."

He knew he was being a bit overdramatic, but having gotten this far Lawrence, too, wanted the boy to come along.

There was a chance Col had taken the night lookout duty in order to steal a copper coin from Ragusa's boat, after all.

"Er... what... is it?"

Holo looked around, then untied the sash around her waist with a practiced hand.

Lawrence wondered if the relish with which she did so was his imagination.

Holo could easily grasp another's thoughts.

She had already long since anticipated what Col's reaction would be.

Though he didn't yet understand why, Col saw that Holo seemed to be taking her clothes off, and he stiffened. Lawrence came over, and taking him by the shoulder, he turned him around.

Swissh, swissh came the sound of unwrapping silk. Col looked up at Lawrence, his face red with confusion.

Such a naive lad, thought Lawrence, but when he realized Holo must think much the same thing when looking at Lawrence himself, his thoughts were complicated.

"—nchoo!"

The sneeze was Holo's.

And as for the outcome of the bet—

Holo was the winner.

How can Col's reaction be described?

He cried out, to be sure.

And it was a grand cry indeed.

But it was clear that it was not a fearful cry.

His face was near a smile and near tears, as well.

When Holo licked Col's face with her great tongue, he fell clear on his backside, and Lawrence finally found the words to describe Col's reaction.

It was like a boy meeting his hero.

That was exactly it.

"You seem dissatisfied."

When Holo had first shown her wolf form to Lawrence, he'd mistakenly shied away.

So he could hardly complain when she grumbled this at him and nudged his head with her nose.

Once Col had regained his composure, he'd made a hesitant request, which they were now fulfilling.

"That tickles. Are you quite finished?" Holo swished her tail, and out from behind it appeared Col.

Who would have thought that his first reaction upon seeing Holo's form would be to ask if he could touch her tail?

The request had surprised Holo, too, and she had been so de-



lighted that her tail had wagged enough to make it hard for Col to touch.

"I suppose this was fated somehow," said Lawrence, folding up Holo's clothes and packing them away.

"Ah—er, so you'll take me with you, then...?" Col realized that in all the fuss of seeing Holo's true nature, he had completely forgotten his original request, and he quickly returned to himself.

"We'd be in trouble if the Church found out about us. We can't very well let someone who knows go free," said Lawrence with mischief in his eyes, patting Col's head. "But stealing copper coins from Ragusa's boat was going a bit too far."

The amount wasn't much, but theft was still theft.

When the chests arrived in Kerube, it would be Ragusa who would take the blame.

"Uh, the—copper coins?" Col's reaction was a bit strange. "I didn't actually steal those."

"Oh?" asked Lawrence. Holo, too, seemed interested and lay on her belly next to the other two, listening.

"Actually I figured out the reason why the copper coin chests don't add up."

"Wha—?" Lawrence found himself exclaiming, leaning forward, and with more than a little frustration. "...And then what happened?"

"Er, yes, well, I planned to steal some at first. Once I understood the reason the amounts didn't add up, it seemed like it would be easy."

Lawrence remembered Col the previous night, lining up coins under the moonlight.

Had he figured everything out by then?

"That's why I volunteered for the night watch. I thought even if I told you I wanted to go with you, you might refuse, and...but Mr. Ragusa had been really nice to me, and I couldn't just steal

from him, so…I told him everything. That I wanted to go with you and Holo and also that I wanted to trade the information about the copper coins for my boat fare."

Ragusa's conflicted face came to Lawrence's mind.

"So where did you get those coins?"

"I got them from Mr. Ragusa. But not out of the chests—he gave them to me out of his own coin purse. For luck, he said. And also—"

"And also so that when you caught up to us, you could pretend you'd stolen them and couldn't go back," said Holo, and Col smiled apologetically.

"That's right."

Ragusa really had taken a liking to the boy.

And yet he'd spoken out for him, despite his own feelings.

Lawrence almost wanted to tell Col to give up on the path of learning and go become Ragusa's apprentice instead.

"So that is that. Shall we be off, then? People are coming," said Holo, raising her head and looking far off into the distance.

It would be bothersome if they were spotted by travelers.

Lawrence and Col hastily got to their feet and resumed their preparations to leave, but just as Col was climbing upon Holo's back (at her urging), Lawrence said, "I have one thing to ask you."

Col stopped and looked back at Lawrence; Holo, too, regarded him with her amber eyes. "What is it?" the boy asked.

Lawrence's face was extremely serious as he spoke. "Just before you and I walked together yesterday, this wolf whispered something to you, didn't she? What did she say?"

He'd been evaded once before, but Lawrence now asked again.

Col looked as though if he said anything, there would be no more talk of traveling. "Er…"

He looked at Holo uncertainly, as though she'd told him not to say anything.

"If you say, there's no telling what these fangs may do," said Holo, baring those same fangs, but her voice made it clear she was smiling.

Col's wide, intelligent eyes moved, and Lawrence could tell he was trying to divine the truth of Holo's threat.

He soon seemed to arrive at the answer.

He smiled, nodded. "I'm sorry. I can't say," he replied, fully on Holo's side now.

"Heh-heh-heh. Come now. Hurry and get on."

Col bowed to Lawrence with an apologetic smile, then climbed on Holo's back.

Lawrence could only scratch his head with a resigned sigh.

"What is the matter?" Holo's stern wolf face was still capable of expressing subtle emotion. She had a malicious smile as she spoke through her sharp fangs.

"Not a thing." Lawrence shrugged, then climbed on.

He had more or less expected that this was how things would be when Col joined them.

But if he was asked whether that was a bad thing, he could only shrug.

"Oh, one more thing," said Lawrence as he sat astride Holo, behind the nervous Col. "What was the reason the chests didn't add up?"

"Oh, that's—"

Just as Col was about to answer, Holo silently got to her feet. *"That's something you should figure out for yourself,"* she said shortly.

"...What, you've understood it, too?" Lawrence asked in disbelief, at which Holo raised her chin slightly to regard him as her ears flicked.

"And why not? But one thing is certain," she said, beginning to walk slowly but gradually speeding up as she became used to the sensations of this form.

Soon she was moving quickly enough that the wind was bitingly cold unless her passengers crouched down.

"You'll take more enjoyment from puzzling over the coins than from talking to me, will you not?" came her resentful sarcasm.

Immediately thereafter she increased her speed dramatically—which was surely done on purpose.

Lawrence grumbled as he tightened his grip on her fur and crouched lower.

Col sat in front of him, so when they crouched, the boy was half underneath him.

Which meant that when Col giggled, Lawrence knew.

The scenery began to blur.

The wind was like ice.

But there in the bitterly cold wind, Lawrence smiled faintly.

His heart was warm.

A journey of three unlikely companions.

Lawrence knew of a single word to describe the situation.

Yet he didn't let it cross his lips.

He wouldn't do that.

But when it came time to write of his travels with Holo, perhaps he would lightly write it there in the margins of the thick volume.

Like this:

And so, the trio's journey began.

Yes—yes, indeed.

It was very much like a rehearsal.

But no.

He wouldn't write it.

Not in the actual book.

Carefully, so Holo wouldn't notice, Lawrence smiled.

The journey had begun, full of hope—the journey to end the journey.

AFTERWORD

It has been a while. I'm Isuna Hasekura, and this is the sixth volume of *Spice and Wolf*.

Time does fly! Just one month after I write this afterword will be the third Dengeki Novel Prize awards ceremony that I personally have attended.

Of course, that means deadlines come quickly, too. It's certainly not my fault—it's the flow of time that's to blame. Stupid time!

Incidentally, I recently had the following conversation with a fellow author.

"Hasekura, how're your stocks doing?"

"Oh, pretty good. Sometimes I make even [AMOUNT REDACTED] yen a day."

"That much?"

"That much. When I make [AMOUNT REDACTED] in a day, though, it kinda makes me not want to do work."

"Really? So when you take a loss, it makes you feel like you have to work harder, right?"

"No, actually. When I lose money, I feel awful, and work's the last thing on my mind."

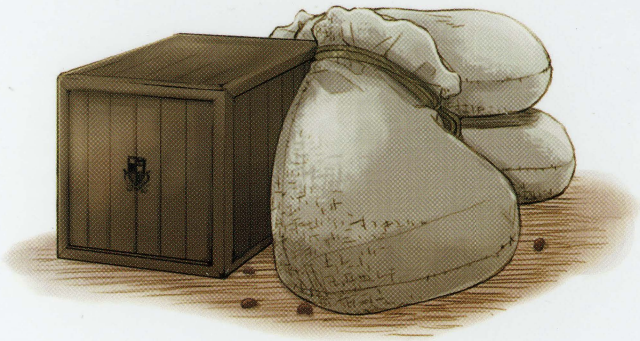
"I see. So you work when the market's closed, then?"
The stock market closes on weekends and holidays.
I answered, "Are you crazy? Work on a weekend?"

So that's how I've managed to plow through the sixth volume of *Spice and Wolf*. This volume had fewer economic elements, I think, so my plan is to really cram them into the next one. The manga adaptation is starting, and I think right about the time this afterword along with the rest of volume six makes it to bookstores, the anime broadcast will be imminent. I'll try to work really hard so I don't lose out to all that stuff!

Also, in reality I'm working about six days a week.

Let's meet again in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura



As Holo and Lawrence begin the final leg of their journey, Lawrence decides to accompany Holo to her ancient home of Yoitsu, if only to forestall their parting just a bit longer. Boarding a ship from the port of Lenos (much to the chagrin of the wisewolf, who is none too fond of water!), the pair's fate becomes entangled with that of a boy named Col, whose tale of his circumstances — combined with the gossip of the sailors — leads to a shocking revelation about Holo's homeland!

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