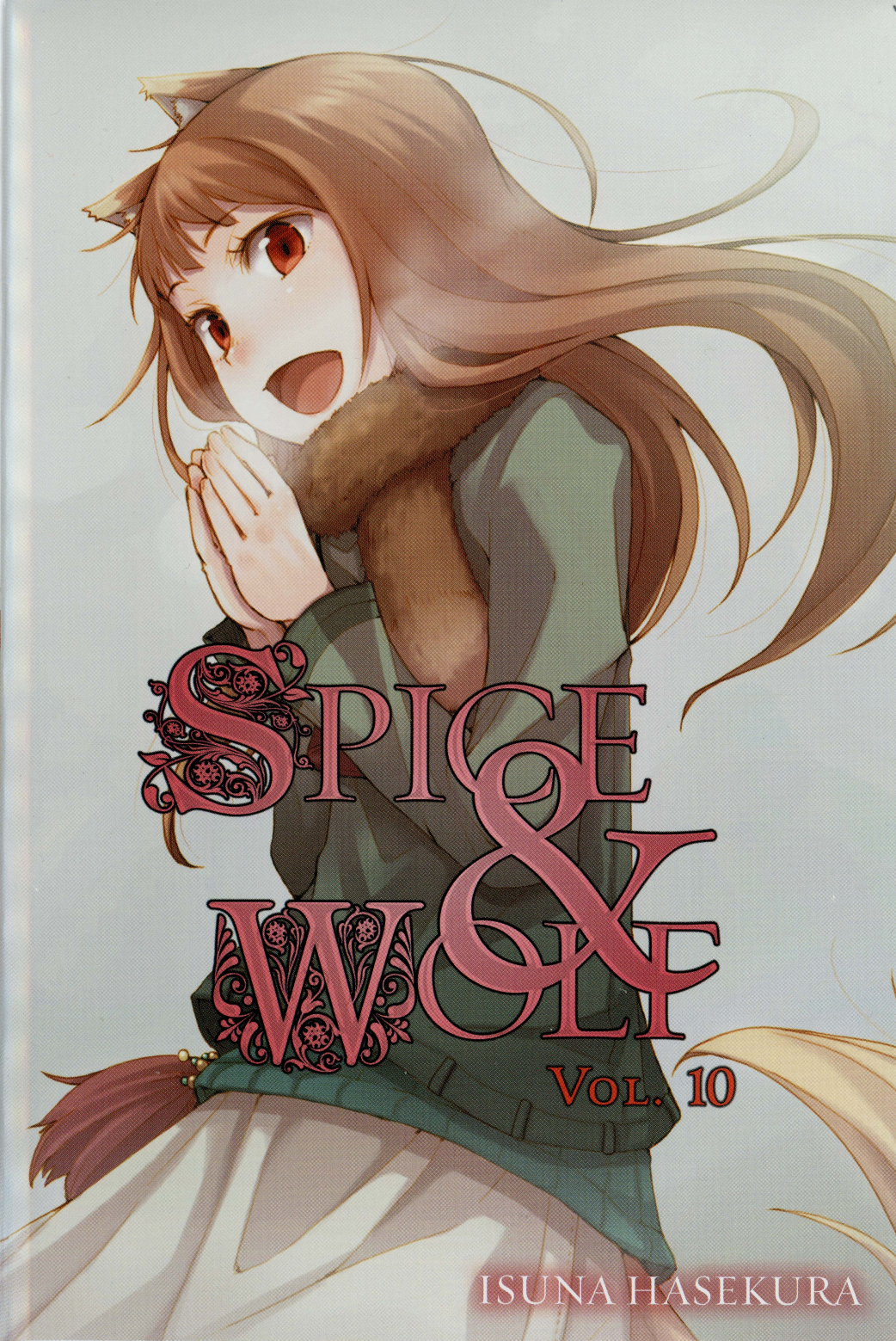

SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 10
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 10

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura



"The banner of the moon and shield will always fly in the wind, so I won't worry about such minor details, eh?"

— Tote Col,
the Traveling Scholar

— Lagh Piasky,
a merchant of the Ruvik Alliance

— Huskins the Shepherd

"One of those had his eye on us just now."

"I wondered."

"……MM."

"Please, just bear it a little longer."

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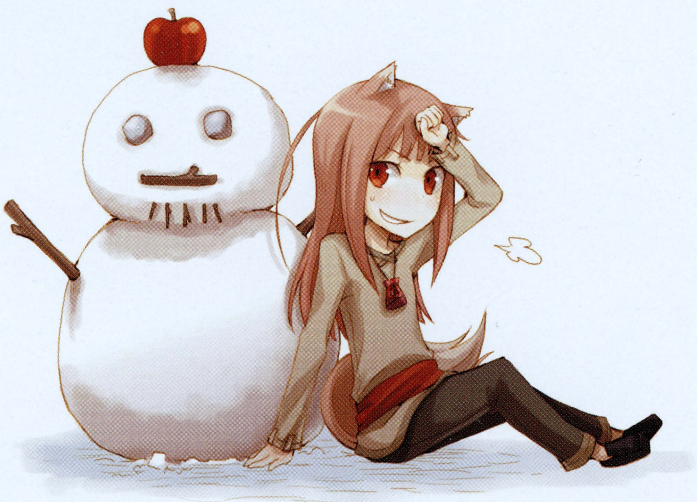
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SPICE & WOLF

VOLUME X

ISUNA HASEKURA

Yen Press
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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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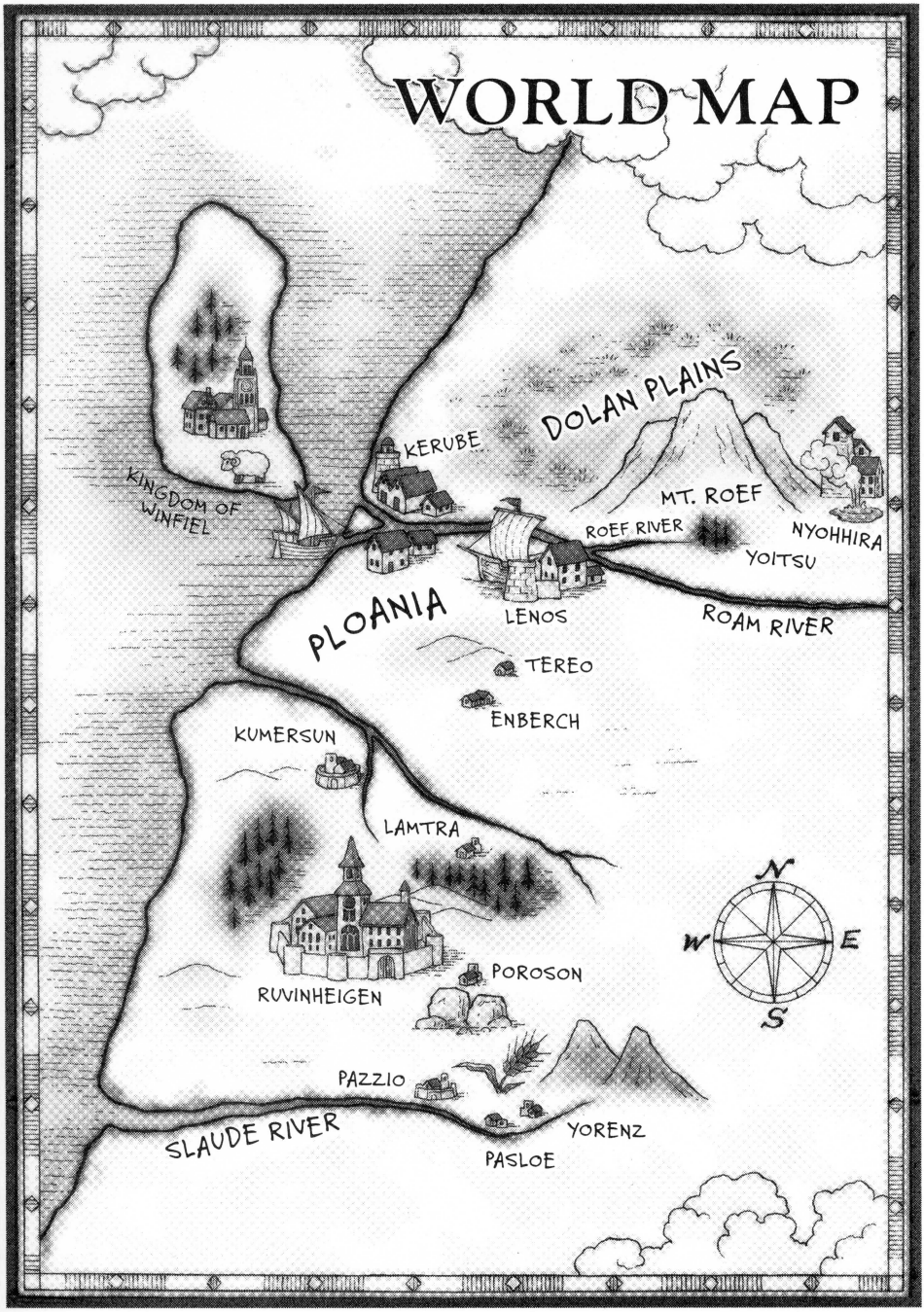
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PROLOGUE



Candles are a luxury.

On top of only illuminating about as much space as one can encircle with one's arms, they burn out after only a short time.

Thus, candles are generally only burned when conducting activities that cannot be done in daylight—activities like carefully paring down the edges of a gold coin with a knife, sewing a secret pouch into the bottom of a burlap sack, or placing heavily taxed salt into that pouch.

When business was especially good, Lawrence might even sketch out the facade of the shop he hoped to someday own, on paper that was itself none too cheap.

And all of these activities were of a sort that one smiled to oneself while performing them.

The Church sometimes preached that smiling to oneself at night invited demons—no doubt this was thanks to the image of the lone merchant, chuckling to himself at his desk late at night.

Long ago, he himself had tossed nervously in his blanket after having seen the hunched-over form of his master late at night.

When had his habit of keeping a candle burning despite having no particular tasks to attend to begun? He watched the wick

burn down slowly, staring at the wine in his cup—wine he had no intention of drinking.

No, he knew perfectly well why he kept the candle burning.

For so long the night had been nothing but an obstacle to his business, but now he wanted to savor it just a bit longer—savor this quiet, peaceful time before tomorrow arrived with its inevitable noise and bother.

He could hear the alternating sighs of two slumbering. If it allowed him to go on listening to that peaceful sound, he did not mind lighting another candle.

But if he failed to sleep soon himself, his body would pay the price.

He smiled soundlessly and made as though to blow the candle out—but just before he did, he hesitated and looked at the source of the sleeping breaths.

Even in the dark, all would be well.

The image lingered in his vision right up until the moment he drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER ONE



The moment it left port, a ship became a very unreliable mode of transportation.

While sailors considered a certain amount of pitching and rolling to be hardly worthy of mention, those unused to sea travel evidently felt such motions as though the earth itself were giving way.

"Evidently"—as Lawrence himself was not the one who felt this way.

He had two traveling companions, who played happily about on the ship's deck while it remained at the port. Once it launched, though, and they had gone belowdecks with the rest of the cargo and passengers, Col clung to Lawrence and refused to let go.

Slight of build and delicate, his trembling, curled-up form gave him the look of a kitten. Lawrence, naturally, did not laugh, instead letting the boy sit, trembling, upon his lap.

In the seven years since he had turned eighteen and ventured out on his own as a traveling merchant, Lawrence had traveled far and wide and sampled all manner of experiences. He remembered well his first sea voyage and how every movement of the

ship had made him want to cry out, so he could hardly laugh at the boy.

Such thoughts occupied his mind as he gently patted the boy's trembling back.

Yet he couldn't help but smile wryly, looking over the dim, musty interior of the ship's hold.

Though it was a bit unfair to the trembling boy, Lawrence rather wished it were his *other* companion who was in such a state.

If only Col had been the energetic one—the wandering student was often mistaken for a girl and was normally both perceptive and well behaved.

Lawrence sighed as he caught sight of a form descending into the hold from the ship's deck.

"'Tis the sea! The sea!" His other companion, Holo, plopped herself down, eyes aglitter.

She was hooded and wore a robe that reached all the way down to her ankles, dressed every inch a nun. But with her frolicking atop the deck and her casual cross-legged posture, it was plainly obvious to anyone that she was no nun.

Her appearance was only for convenience's sake; it was easier for all if she appeared as a nun.

So Lawrence had no particular desire to furrow his brow at her coarse manner, but he did pull down the edge of her robe with the hand that wasn't busy patting Col.

"Hmm?" Holo looked over her shoulder at him with a quizzical expression.

"The tail you're so very proud of."

Holo grinned at Lawrence's words, hiding her tail under her robe.

In addition to identifying Holo as a nun, the long, hooded robe she wore served another important purpose. It hid the wolf tail

that sprouted from the rump of what appeared to be a young girl, as well as concealing the wolf ears atop her head.

The mouth with which she grinned had very sharp teeth.

Holo was not the young girl she appeared to be.

She was a centuries-old wolf god transformed into human form.

"Still, though—the sea!"

"I know, I know. Could you not calm yourself a bit? You're like a dog seeing snow for the first time."

"Urgh... how can one remain calm? 'Tis so vast! Vaster than the vastest plain I've ever seen! 'Tis well they call it 'the deep'!"

"You've seen the sea before, haven't you?"

"Aye. I've run my heart out along the beach, jumping into the waves out of a longing to cross the ocean. How grand it would be if I could race over its boundless surface—when humans see birds, do they not long to fly? How can you not long to run, seeing the sea?"

Though she had many a time proclaimed herself to be the Wisewolf of Yoitsu and demonstrated her cleverness to Lawrence time and again, in that moment Holo seemed every bit a puppy to him.

Feeling a bit irritable, he answered her. "I might well wonder what lands lay far across the ocean, but even then, I hardly feel like running over it."

"You're a useless male."

Despite being cut off so curtly, Lawrence didn't so much as wince. He certainly understood what it was to be excited at the sight of the ocean.

While he did occasionally catch a glimpse of Holo's more beast-like tendencies, seeing her act so thoroughly puppyish made him anxious about what could happen in the future.

After all, their ship was bound for the snowy kingdom of

Winfiel. A cat would want to curl up in front of the fireplace, but a dog would go dashing through the snow. He wondered seriously if a collar and leash would be appropriate.

As Lawrence mused over such things, Holo sneezed grandly.

"Here, get under this blanket. If you keep running around in the cold and wet, you'll catch cold."

"Mmph...'Tis a shame the sea wind is so wet. The salt smell confuses my nose, it does." Beneath the blanket that she wrapped around over her robe, Holo sniffed, as though the scent of the familiar fabric would clear her nose. "Oh, by the way—"

"Hmm?"

"I faintly saw a bit of land ahead. Is that our destination?"

"No, that's just another island. We'll head north from here and probably arrive in the evening."

The kingdom of Winfiel was a large island surrounded by a scattering of smaller ones, separated from the mainland by a strait, across which one could just barely make out the opposite shore.

There was a legend that long ago, a war had raged across the strait, and a warrior who was the incarnation of a war god had thrown a spear all the way across it.

That was, of course, nonsense, but it did illustrate the narrow width of the strait.

"Hmm. Well, I surely hope the wind blows steady."

"The wind?"

"We'll make no progress with a headwind, will we? 'Tis well now, though, with our sails full of a tailwind."

For a moment, Lawrence was not sure of what expression he should make. If he flaunted his better knowledge too obviously, there was no telling what hell he might catch for it later.

He smiled, though not so smugly as to invite irritation. "True," he said. "But a ship can make progress even with a headwind. It's a bit slower, of course."

"..." Partially concealed beneath her robe and blanket, Holo looked up at him suspiciously, like a fox peering out of its burrow. Her flicking ears made it clear she doubted the truth of his statement.

"I can understand why you might not believe it without seeing it. But even with a headwind, a boat heads diagonally into the wind, tacking left, then right. Evidently the first sailors to discover this technique were accused of witchcraft by the Church."

"..." Holo glared at Lawrence dubiously for a moment, but eventually seemed to believe him.

"Still, to think we'd end up crossing the sea," he murmured with a slight smile, then looked up at the ceiling of the hold.

With each undulation of the ship, the decks would creak worryingly, but it was a lullaby one had only to become used to. The first time he had been on a ship, Lawrence was terribly afraid it would simply fall to pieces.

"I suppose your beloved horse is resting easy, munching on hay at this very moment."

"It's not as though I wanted to give him a break—there's just little for him to do right now. I envy him."

"Oh ho, whence this bitterness?"

Broadly speaking, the stated reason for Lawrence and his companions' current journey was to fulfill Holo's wish. Of course, both Lawrence and Holo were well aware that was a mere pretense, so Holo was clearly just teasing him a bit.

"I suppose it's true that both of us are on a hiatus from our work... but it would be nice to just relax, that's all I meant."

Up until a few days previous, Lawrence had been caught up in a disturbance that threatened to rip the town of Kerube—from which they'd departed—in half.

A legendary animal, a narwhal, had been caught in some fisherman's net, and some very clever merchants had fought over the tremendously valuable creature.

Lawrence's original goal had been information regarding the foreleg bones of a wolf-god like Holo, but after a series of twists and turns, he had wound up in the very heart of the tumult.

Many times he had thought of himself as a dirty, money-hungry merchant, but the incident had taught him the truth of the saying that there's always a bigger fish. In Kerube, he had met Kieman, the young manager of a trade guild's branch office, and Eve, who had planned to betray the entire town and keep all the profit for herself.

But in the end, Lawrence had been the key to settling everything to the satisfaction of all and had managed to get the information he sought on the wolf bones, though not necessarily in return for his services. Thus had he found himself aboard this ship.

In his breast pocket were letters of introduction from Kieman and Eve that would give him at least some moderate advantage. On this, his first trip to the kingdom of Winfiel, those letters were weapons whose presence reassured him greatly.

Of course, just as beasts hated the smell of iron, Holo hated the smell of those letters.

"Still, you did receive a reward for all that trouble, did you not? Surely 'twill count as a bit of savings, anyway."

"...Ah, so you're the reason those silver coins went missing from my coin purse, eh?"

"Without my help, you'd hardly have managed such a crisis. Given that, my price is a cheap one," said Holo easily, pulling the blanket more snugly about herself.

The wolf knew exactly how far she could push someone before they lost their temper. Though the contents of a merchant's purse were his lifeblood, Lawrence could not rouse himself to anger and simply gave a helpless sigh.

"Surely you gave the boy his share, too, yes?" Lawrence said, pointing to Col, which Holo sniffed at and closed her eyes.

Col's wits had proven the key to solving their problems in Kerube. But given his personality, he could not possibly have asked for any reward, and even if offered one, he would not have accepted it.

By stealing money from Lawrence's coin purse, Holo had forced him to take it. No doubt she had made sure to do her thieving while Lawrence was out and Col was watching, thus making him an accomplice.

Lawrence patted the boy's curled-up form. Holo's tail swished audibly.

"Still, the Great Abbey of Brondel will be a troublesome place."

"Is it filled with bigoted old men?" Holo's face popped out of the blanket.

Lawrence coughed and patted his chest, then answered. "'The great abbey of Brondel's reputation precedes it far and wide. Its august grandeur makes pagan gods tremble, and its magnificence supports countless men. Ah, mighty abbey of Brondel, dwelling place of the most high God.'"

Holo wrinkled her nose at Lawrence's grandiose recitation of the famous lines of poetry. As she was one of those same pagan gods, it did not sound like a particularly pleasant place for her.

"Of course, regardless of how many saints it may have produced long ago, these days people like us should feel right at home there."

"Hmm?"

"Its holy reputation means it receives huge donations of land and truly outlandish tithes—and given that, they have to manage those assets, whether they want to or not. And being the dwelling place of God, they have keep those assets sparkling. These days it's practically a trading company itself. And as it's run by an arrogant monk, it's got all the ingredients to be a nasty place indeed."

Once, when the papacy of the main Church sect had clashed with a secular monarch, it was said that the pope had banished

the king to the snowy plains for a full three days. A merchant would hardly have gotten off so easily. Anecdotes of the unreasonable obstacles the Church foisted on merchants were a popular topic of small talk among them when trying to close a deal.

Nevertheless, recent rumors were that the great Abbey of Brondel's business had receded, though the only ones to suffer during such recessions were the commoners—the nobility only grew more confident.

"And the bones we seek are in this nasty place?" Holo lowered her voice, given the topic.

Lawrence nodded vaguely—though he had received the information from Eve, he was none too confident in it.

"There's a good chance of that, but in any case they'll be hidden away behind the great walls of the abbey. They say God himself doesn't know what happens within them."

"I once heard a sermon that said nothing can be truly hidden."

"Your feelings show up well enough in your ears and tail, it's true."

"Aye, and yours are all over your face," said Holo, yawning lazily, which Lawrence could not help but yawn at himself. Regardless of how they'd been when they first met, conversations like this were mere greetings between them now. At the moment, he was more worried about his exchanges with Col than with Holo.

Lawrence gently pulled back the blanket Col was wrapped in and saw that the boy had fallen asleep. If he stayed asleep, he would not have to fear the rocking of the boat, nor worry about getting seasick.

He replaced the blanket carefully and saw Holo retreating back within her own blanket, having leaned out of it to peer at Col—evidently she was concerned about him, too.

"Wake me once we've arrived."

In response to her muffled words, Lawrence patted her hunched-over back lightly, which made the blanket rise, then fall. Taking this as a satisfied sigh, Lawrence smiled, leaving his hand on her back.

The ship's progress continued uneventfully, and it arrived as planned in the Winfiel kingdom's port town of Jiik.

When they had launched, they sky had been a leaden gray, but as they descended from the ship's deck to the docks, it was dyed a deep red, and Col—who had ended up sleeping the rest of the journey—squinted his eyes at the brightness of it.

A port in winter could often make one think of a summer sunset. Perhaps this was thanks to it being a place where the activity level rose with the temperature, a place that had now grown quiet. It felt languid, suffused with melancholy. And yet it felt *too* quiet, perhaps because of the cold.

The kingdom of Winfiel was the very image of a northern country, as the winter snows closed much of the land off.

As the sun set, the port air grew shockingly cold, and looking around, Lawrence could see piles of snow at the corners of buildings and the edges of the streets.

Col had only a tattered pair of straw sandals, and he shuffled his feet rapidly, as though unable to keep them still for even a moment.

"Come, you, if we don't find an inn soon, we'll all freeze on the spot," said Holo. She, too, had slept most of the journey away, curled up in a blanket, and having just awoken evidently found the chill intolerable.

"Didn't it snow often in your homelands? Have a little endurance."



"You fool—should I cover myself in fur right here, then?" said Holo, wrapping her arms around Col from behind.

Lawrence only cocked his head by way of response and then produced the letter of introduction he had gotten from Kieman and looked it over.

"'See Mr. Deutchmann of the Tyler Company,' eh?"

On the letter was a careful drawing of the Tyler Company's seal, and Lawrence began walking, letter in hand. The docks were full of well-known companies, some of them with names that nearly anyone would have known.

Despite the Winfiel winters being very snowy, the other seasons were quite mild with plenty of rain, and the fertile, grassy plains stretched on and on. Any livestock raised there, be they horses or cattle, grew healthy and strong in such conditions—but the sheep were particularly famous.

It was often said of the kingdom that it grew more wool than grass, and it exported more wool than anywhere else in the world.

The loading docks of the trading companies along the port were piled high with bundles of wool bags, and dangling from each company's eaves was a sign sporting the ram's horn mark that was proof the merchant had the monarchy's permission to deal in wool.

The Tyler Company was at the end of a row of shops, and its facade was of the highest quality. The sun had set, and candlelight from within the building seeped out, which was the best sign of a successful business.

Lawrence knocked on the wooden door, which soon opened.

No matter the town or port, merchants and craftsmen were always very particular about their hours of business.

"And who are you?"

"My deepest apologies for the late hour. I'm hoping to see Mr. Deutchmann of the Tyler Company."

"Deutchmann? And you are—?"

"Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trade Guild. I come by Lud Kieman of Kerube," said Lawrence, offering the letter of introduction.

The bearded, middle-aged merchant stared openly at Lawrence's face for a moment before accepting the letter, then looked it over front to back before saying, "Just a moment, please," and retreating back within the building.

The door was still open a crack, and warm air trickled out of it. Additionally, perhaps since they had arrived just at the end of the workday, that warm air carried the scent of honeyed sheep or cow's milk. Even Lawrence found the smell tantalizing, and to Holo's sensitive nose, it seemed nigh unbearable. Her stomach growled audibly.

Just then, the merchant returned and opened the door. The stomach growl had been quite loud, so he might well have heard it.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting. Please do come in, Mr. Lawrence."

"Ah, thank you." Lawrence gave the man a small bow and went inside, followed by Holo and Col.

The merchant closed the door, then walked ahead of them, saying, "This way, please."

Immediately inside the trading house was a space for negotiation, with several desks and tables made ready. All the furnishings were very finely decorated, and the walls were adorned with banners bearing the face of the ruler of the kingdom. It seemed more like a noble manor than a trading company.

A few of the company's merchants sat around a table playing cards. While the people of Winfiel loved to gamble, they were generally not vulgar about it and played with refinement and grace.

Rather than heckling and hooting with a drink in one hand,

they preferred warm drinks and elegant pastimes, which only added to the air of gentility.

Lawrence took in the trading company's interior as the merchant led them to the second floor. "Was the sea very rough?" the merchant asked.

"Not at all. Perhaps God blessed our journey, as it was an easy one."

"I'm happy to hear it. Not long ago I heard it was very rough indeed somewhat north of here. Normally the current flows south to north, but it was so bad the flow reversed itself."

When the seas were rough in the offing, all sorts of fish could be caught nearer the shore. Perhaps that was to thank for the catching of the narwhal near Kerube.

"The seas in this area are not usually so rough, but once roused they can be quite persistent. Normally when the snow falls, it's as still as a pond."

"I see. Perhaps that's why so many of the people here are so gentle and refined."

"Ha-ha-ha! We're just a bunch of choleric opportunists, that's all."

All who made trade their business would meet people from every land in the inns and taverns. While everyone had their own unique personality and outlook, each region had its characteristics, and the people of Winfiel were gentle and refined. But just as their guide had so skillfully put it, they could also be described as choleric and opportunistic.

Lawrence wondered if Holo were to spend a few years here, would she grow calmer and more obedient, just like the sheep? But if she turned choleric, it would make her disposition even worse.

He glanced at Holo, and she returned his look with a quizzically cocked head.

"This way," said the merchant, knocking at a door, then opening it without waiting for a reply. "Do come in."

As they were led inside, Lawrence felt a hint of surprise color his face.

Holo's eyes opened wide, and Col made a small sound of surprise.

The room into which they had been led had walls that were covered floor to ceiling in shelves, within which were stored all manner of threads, woven cloth, wool, and looms for spinning it.

But what drew the eye more than anything else was the sheep skulls.

Illuminated by the candlelight, their hollow eyes silently watched the intruders entering their realm—there had to be at least twenty of them, some narrow-jawed, some wide, some with great horns and some with small.

A sudden sound brought Lawrence back to himself. A man sitting and writing at a desk in the corner of the room had gotten to his feet.

If this had been a business negotiation, being distracted by the room's decor would have certainly cost Lawrence credibility, and the room's owner surely was trying to accomplish exactly that.

He smiled a very satisfied smile.

"These are the sheep that bring us such wealth, though I can hardly show this to the Church."

The mustached man seemed in the prime of his life, and when he smiled, his eyes nearly disappeared into the creases around them. When Lawrence shook his hand, his palm was a thick-skinned one. He was certainly gracious, but that was the only expression—not many people could hide the rest of their intent so thoroughly.

Lawrence found himself deeply relieved that he was not attempting a business negotiation with this man. No matter how

skilled he became, there would be some opponents he would always find difficult.

"I am Amn Deutchmann, and I'm in charge of wool trading at this company."

"My most humble apologies for the sudden visit. I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trade Guild."

"Well, do sit down."

"Thank you."

The standard pleasantries concluded, Lawrence, Holo, and Col all sat down on the couch, and across from them sat Deutchmann. A low table separated them.

The merchant who had led them inside gave a short bow, then left the room.

"Now, then, I must say I could scarcely hide my surprise at seeing Mr. Kieman's name come up—he was once called 'the Eye of Kerube.' To say nothing of the name Bolan. I must wonder just what sort of terrifying deal I'm going to be asked to swallow here!"

It was very Winfiel-like of him to make jokes that elicited wry grins all around. Lawrence took the cue and scratched his nose as though making an excuse. "A king only gives thanks to his subjects during wartime. In such times, even a cup of water can seem like a gift of fine furs."

"Oh ho. So there's some sort of disturbance in Kerube, is there?"

"I'm sure you'll hear of it shortly. I'd be perfectly happy to tell you about it myself, though I'm not certain you would believe me."

Surprisingly enough, the words seemed to rouse Deutchmann's interest. His shoulders shook with mirth. "Miracles do happen in business!" He continued, "Now, then, about this letter of yours."

"Yes, sir."

"You say you wish to visit the great Brondel Abbey?"

"Yes. I was hoping for help in visiting them for a reason other than buying wool."

"Oh ho."

Traveling merchants wore beards, but the town merchants of Winfiel seemed to favor mustaches. Deutchmann fingered his magnificent mustache, twisting it as he regarded Lawrence.

"I believe that pilgrims to the abbey are only received at a building separate from the central complex and aren't allowed to approach the abbey itself."

"That is true. Even among those connected to the abbey, only a few are allowed entry. As you may well know, even wool trading is done at a specially designated branch. So..."

"It's no easy task to knock on the doors of the main abbey."

"Indeed, it is not, Mr. Lawrence. Of course, the mercantile branch is the main abbey's lifeline, so it does have some connection... but... surely you're not suggesting..."

Lawrence knew perfectly well what the canny merchant's narrowed eyes were seeing.

The signature of Bolan.

If they had come neither as pilgrims to the famous Brondel Abbey, nor as traders seeking wool, the remaining possibilities were few indeed.

And nearly any merchant with a sizable enough business would recognize Eve's name, the name of a fallen noble family of Winfiel—and there was only one reason for it to come up.

"I am not a political agent. Please rest assured."

But a merchant's words were never trustworthy. It was hardly surprising that Deutchmann's gaze came out from his narrowed eyes needle sharp. The Tyler Company's wool buyer looked back and forth between the introduction letter and Lawrence's face and then finally glanced at Holo and Col.

If Lawrence had been alone, he would have been politely shown the door.

But with two traveling companions, it was unlikely that he was anybody's secret messenger, Deutchmann eventually seemed to conclude.

"My apologies if I've made you uncomfortable."

"Hardly. It's only natural you'd be suspicious, I should think."

"Thank you very much. But this is precisely the sort of problem that Brondel Abbey is facing at the moment."

"Oh?" Lawrence asked, but just then there was a knock at the door, and a maid entered carrying a tray.

It bore the same thing the men downstairs were drinking as they played cards, Lawrence supposed. The cups steamed warmly, but not too warmly to comfortably hold—evidently the hosts were considerate enough to provide their visitors with something to chase off the cold.

"Please, drink. It's sheep's milk with honey and ginger. This time of year, kings and commoners alike drink it. It'll warm you."

"Well, thank you."

The milk was still bubbling, and Lawrence was worried his teeth would melt if he drank it. He didn't mind sweet things, but there was a limit.

If he just took a sip for politeness's sake, it seemed likely that Holo would take advantage of the opportunity and drink down the rest.

"So, about what I was saying."

"Yes, quite."

"Mr. Lawrence, did anything in particular strike you when you saw the port today?"

Changing the subject and asking a sudden pointed question was a good way to determine someone's true motives. As such, Lawrence didn't stop to think and simply answered his mind.

"Out of what I supposed was a combination of the chill and the hour, it seemed a bit desolate."

"Yes, you're quite right. Business has been bad recently—and I'm not saying that just to make merchant small talk. It's the truth."

"...You'll have to forgive me, but as a traveling merchant from the mainland, I'm not terribly familiar with the circumstances here."

"I see. Not even of King Sufon's ban?"

"Embarrassingly, no."

Traveling merchants like Lawrence needed a grasp of any proclamations that affected business in the lands they traveled. But unlike traveling merchants who could flee to the hinterlands if things went poorly, a trading company needed a port in order to unload its goods, and to them, such proclamations were like the word of God.

"To put it plainly, imports have been banned. Exports are fine. But wheat and wine are the only imports allowed. The goal is—"

"—to stop the loss of currency, I assume."

"You assume correctly. King Sufon has been on the throne for five years, and his greatest goal is to make his nation wealthy. But wool sales have steadily dropped—the last few years have been truly awful. And given that Winfiel has little else it can export abroad, it only stands to reason that the more our imports exceed our exports, the poorer our nation becomes. Which is why the king, who has no experience with business, came up with that solution."

Deutchmann raised both his hands in a gesture of resignation. If his frustration was any indication, no doubt the ban was deeply unpopular in the town.

"No merchant will trouble himself to come here once he learns he won't be allowed to sell his goods. The number of ships in the

harbor has dropped, and the inns are all empty. The taverns sell no wine, nor meat, nor do travelers buy any blankets or mantles. Stables are on the verge of ruin just feeding their horses, and the money changers have nothing to weigh save the dust on their scales."

"It's a vicious cycle."

"Exactly. A king who knows how to swing a sword is at a loss when it comes to applying his mind. Given the situation, it's no surprise conditions are so bad. Currency vanished from the town in the blink of an eye, and now look—here we are."

As he spoke, Deutchmann produced a coin with a practiced motion.

The Winfiel kingdom had been founded after ages of conflict with the kings of nearby islands and struggle with the pirates of the northern seas. Sufon was the third in the line, and his profile was embossed on this coin, though this one was so blackened its details could barely be discerned.

"It looks like this because they've mixed copper and who knows what else in with the silver. I hear it's so bad that not even the best money changers can tell how much silver's left. When a coin loses its faith, it's no longer useful for business. I hear some landlords have been hoarding copper coins from the mainland so they can at least buy themselves some bread, but that's a drop in the bucket. And yet with things so bad, the king only turns harsher, so..."

Holo and Col peered at the coin on the table, but straightened when they saw that Deutchmann was continuing.

"And so now merchants have started appearing with an eye toward taking advantage of the situation."

Business was nothing more than a tug-of-war. By pulling on each thread one found, it was easy to see where they led. The economy was poor and the currency so corrupted that it could

not even buy bread, so what then? A nation's economy was not some secret ritual held behind stone walls, so surely its coin would be compared to the coins of other lands.

So what would happen then, once Winfiel's currency alone was inferior and devalued? Just as a weakened deer would be devoured by wolves, fortunes whose value was measured with a weakened coin would be devoured by stronger monies.

"You speak of those who come not to buy goods, but assets."

"Exactly so. Just like sharks attacking a wounded fish. So you see why I was worried you were such a man."

"I see. It does seem likely that Brondel Abbey will become a target. It possesses reputation, influence, and assets aplenty."

"Indeed."

"Incidentally, just who is acting as the shark?"

At this question, Deutchmann bared his canine teeth with a vulgar grin that would not have been out of place in a seedy tavern somewhere. "The crest of the moon and shield."

"…!"

"Even so. The Ruvik Alliance, whose home territory is the whole of the northlands. It is they who play the shark."

It was the single most powerful economic alliance in the world, whose many large warships flew a beautiful green flag bearing a crest with a moon and a shield and with whom no less than eighteen regions and twenty-three craft guilds cooperated. It was backed by thirty noblemen and led by ten great trading companies.

One might joke that at their meeting table, they might decide whom to place on the throne of a given nation, but such a joke could not be easily laughed off.

When targeted by such an organization, ordinary tactics were all but useless.

"Naturally we're all too terrified to do anything, so we've been

reduced to mere bystanders. And they're following the rules. They haven't interfered with the wool trade."

"I suppose their goal is the land held by the abbey."

"Yes. My guess is they're trying to acquire the abbey's territory, buying out the gentry's holdings in order to put pressure on the monarchy—and the gentry are already suffering from increased taxation and decreased revenue. Given their vast size, the alliance can hardly act in secret, which in turn motivates them to move forward."

Lawrence imagined the gentry believing that once this was all over, King Sufon would be reduced to a figurehead.

And once that happened, it would be like an avalanche.

Lawrence looked aside to Holo. They seemed to encounter interesting situations no matter where they went.

"Still, the abbey has been surprisingly stubborn, so the negotiations have run aground. Apparently within the alliance, the various trading companies are each frantically trying to be the first to complete a deal. So, well..."

Deutchmann dropped his gaze again to the letter of introduction, stroking his mustache and cocking his head slightly.

"If you feel it's worthwhile to risk the danger of venturing into such a lair, Mr. Lawrence, I suppose I can introduce you to one of the hydra's heads, but..." Then the choleric, opportunistic merchant of the kingdom of Winfiel smiled faintly. "On one condition: You never spoke with our company."

Lawrence could not immediately reply, but not because he was worried he would change his mind given further time to consider things.

It was because the more interesting the situation, the harder it was to believe that the surrounding merchants would remain uninvolved third parties. When such a fascinating spectacle was to be had, one wanted to see it close up.

Brondel Abbey had set aside a dedicated site for trading with merchants who had come for the wool the abbey raised. And at the moment, it was no doubt in chaos. If he went to check on it and found it too hot to the touch, Lawrence could simply find another way.

He considered this, and without even looking to Holo, he answered, "If you please, then."

Deutchmann smiled.

Thump went the sack of wool as it hit the ground, no doubt soon to be taken to a ship and then sent to some far-off land—or so Lawrence would have easily believed had someone said so.

Within the flat, hemp-stitched burlap sack was a large bundle of woolen quilts, each one far warmer than ten rough, chilly traveling blankets. Sleeping under just a single one of them would make one sweat.

Three such quilts had been brought back to the room.

"This...mmph. Are you quite sure this is all right?" asked Holo, despite having insisted on the finest room in the inn and tossing piece after piece of firewood into the fireplace in order to dry her hair after having washed it clean of salt-sea smell.

Evidently even Holo, who constantly hounded Lawrence to avoid stinginess and stay at fine inns, had some sort of financial sense.

They had never stayed at an inn such as this one, and it was enough to inspire even Holo to express concern.

"There hasn't been a guest in this inn for ten days, and it's been four weeks since any occupied this room, and during this season, guests are even fewer. A single *ryut* was enough to get us the room and firewood with change left over. Of course..." Lawrence pointed at the tarnished coins lined up on the table. "...It's rather doubtful whether we can buy anything with coins such as those."

"Hmph. So you took advantage of their weakness, did you?"

"That's not a very nice way to put it. When demand for something is low, its price will drop."

"Well, so long as you didn't let this room for the sake of your own vanity, 'tis well. Come, Col—take that there."

Holo busily began making up the bed, teasing Col as he timidly took hold of the fluffy wool quilt.

As he watched all this with a wry smile, Lawrence's thoughts were elsewhere.

He was thinking about what Deutchmann had told him about the crisis facing this nation and the Ruvik Alliance's attempt to take advantage of it.

It was said that it was ever the fate of the weak to be eaten by the strong. But what Lawrence found surprising was that even the storied Brondel Abbey could fall victim to that same fate. Even given that the Church's influence was beginning to wane, Lawrence still had the feeling that it had reserves of power that had yet to decline. Particularly just after he had met Holo, it was none other than the Church that had been responsible for her being taken hostage and the mad events that followed.

Of course, Lawrence was not inclined to either cheer or blame one party or the other. Humans, too, ate sheep and were in turn attacked by wolves.

As he mused on such things, Holo shot him a glance.

"That face of yours—I see you're planning something no good again."

Thanks to the fireplace and the sturdily constructed windows, the room had gotten quite warm. Though Holo had taken off her robe, she was still a bit sweaty, probably more from playing with Col than from the room's temperature. Col sat on the bed drinking water from a jug, hunched over in a posture of exhaustion.

Perhaps the scent of wool had gotten her excited.

"It's no good, that much is certain. I just found myself hoping the Church would endure forever."

Holo looked skeptical and sat on a chair, putting to her lips the water jug that was on the table.

Water jug though it might have been, it was filled with wine and was not made of ceramic, iron, or copper. It was instead carved from the shell of a coconut, a fruit from an island nation in the south whose trade must have been prosperous indeed.

"Ah, you mean the conversation from earlier."

"If it bothers you, I suppose I can transform back into a merchant happy to watch the ignominious fall of a once-strong enemy."

"...Fool." After a moment's hesitation, she stepped on Lawrence's foot.

The reason for her hesitation was no doubt her recall of the narwhal crisis in Kerube. Holo was actually quite loyal. And yet she could not just extend her hand to a foe who had caused her such trouble in the past.

In Kerube they had come to the aid of Eve, a beautiful merchant known as the wolf of the Roam River. But Lawrence knew that if he ever used that to tease Holo, he would do so at his own peril.

Ever since Eve had taken him by surprise, Lawrence had been on pins and needles. He had no desire to repeat the experience.

"It's simple sentimentality. Despite my mixed feelings, the Church has come to my rescue many times."

"Mm. I suppose I can understand that. Still, that fellow with the trading company spoke of the situation with no small pleasure."

"He's surely quite pleased. Deutchmann said he was responsible for wool buying, didn't he? Dealing with the abbey must be quite a bother. No wonder he's happy to see them put at a disadvantage."

"Choleric and opportunistic, eh?"

"Exactly. But don't you think you've been a bit too pleased ever since the quilts were brought up?"

Holo frowned at this, her ears pricking and her cheeks puffing out. She then seemed to feel self-conscious and exhaled the contents of her cheeks in a sigh.

"'Twill be hard for me to sleep in such quilts. The scent of sheep will keep me awake."

"And the scent of money will keep *them* awake. And we'll probably have no cause to be involved with the abbey's crisis. Even with your wits, Col's wisdom, and my nerve, this is one opponent we can't face."

"What kind of notion is that?" Holo looked at Lawrence in amused exasperation, her elbow on the table, propping up her chin.

"What should we do, then?" It was Col who took the opportunity to get a word in as he checked the fireplace and placed another log into it. He was quite good at placing the firewood—a true northerner, Lawrence mused.

"I don't imagine that the Ruvik Alliance is after the wolf bones. Had that been the case, Eve or Kieman would've heard something about it."

"So we've just happened to run into them while chasing different prey."

"I don't know if 'run into them' is quite the right phrase, but... in any case, the Ruvik Alliance is a nation-sized opponent. We're no match for them. However, this could be a good opportunity, depending on how we think about it."

"Oh?"

As he listened to the conversation, Col shook his coat out in front of the fireplace, probably trying to use its heat to drive any insects out of it.

"The abbey's been seized by jaws as persistent as any snake. The whole of their estate is in full view, which saves us the trouble of estimating it. Also, according to what Deutchmann said, the alliance is after the abbey's landholdings. Even if the abbey's holdings include the wolf bones, its unlikely they're viewed as important."

Even the Ruvik Alliance couldn't ignore assets worth thousands of gold pieces. But no matter how valuable the wolf bones, they were in the end simply an item that could be purchased with money.

What was truly valuable was that which could not be had for any amount of money.

"I don't think there would be any real danger in simply stopping by the abbey to see. If there were a danger, I suppose it would be..."

"What?" Holo tilted her head curiously.

"It's said that the great Brondel Abbey has flocks of sheep totaling a hundred thousand head. Can you manage that?"

He had first thought about it as a joke, but given Holo's reaction to the wool-stuffed quilt, he was not sure exactly what her reaction might be.

This was the season when merchants came to buy up wool for the coming spring, and simply for purposes of comparison, the number of sheep on display would be huge. And even if that was not the case, sheep-related goods would be everywhere anyway, along with scores of the shepherds whom Holo so detested.

On top of that, there was no telling how excited Holo might become at the sight of the snowy plains, given how she had acted on the ship—Lawrence's worry was outstripped only by his uncertainty.

"All will be well surely," said Holo casually.

Lawrence regarded the unconcerned wolf, wondering where that easy confidence came from.

The cunning wisewolf grinned and continued. "I need only eat so much mutton that the very scent of it drives me off. One may tire of even their favorite food, after all—or am I wrong?"

"..."

"So, it's decided then. Let's prepare! Eating so much it turns distasteful requires some preparation. And look, don't you think young Col wishes to eat mutton, as well? 'Tis written all over his face."

She was only using Col as a pretense, but he seemed none too displeased by it, which made Holo's words that much harder to ignore.

But he had to say *something.*

"I've started to find constantly treating you to such feasts itself distasteful. What do you make of that, eh?"

Holo put on her robe, seemingly unconcerned that it was stiff with accumulated sea salt, pulling the hood over her head. "I don't mind being resented once in a while. If you truly tired of me, though, *that* would be truly painful," she said flirtatiously, placing both hands on her chest.

He would look utterly foolish if he played along with her. "Indeed it would," he answered.

Holo cackled and took Col's hand, walking toward the door. She then twirled around and looked back at him, speaking innocently, like a child. "Come, hurry!"

There was nothing to be done, Lawrence murmured to himself. He took his overcoat in hand and stood.

A strong currency is the most powerful weapon.

A great merchant who had crossed seas and conquered nation

after nation with naught but coin had once said those words, and Lawrence did not consider himself particularly lucky to have been a merchant himself for long enough to realize their truth.

Deutchmann had extended them an invitation to stay at his trading company, but Lawrence had refused. From what he could discern given what Deutchmann had said, the offer had only been put forward because foreign visitors were viewed as easy marks.

And that guess was confirmed the moment they arrived at the inn.

Naturally, Lawrence took heed of Deutchmann's warning not to change any of his coin for Winfiel currency.

Just as a test, Lawrence pulled out a silver *ryut* coin worth slightly less than a *trenni*, and the tavern master's face split in a huge grin.

A heaping pile of mutton, perfectly cooked and covered in a layer of yellow fat, was placed on a plate.

In this season, when grass was thin on the ground, it cost money to feed the sheep. Evidently, shepherds slaughtered more than the usual number of sheep in order to stay afloat, which drove up the cost of the salt and vinegar used to preserve the meat.

But here the cold climate could be used to preserve the meat, so quite naturally it was less expensive. Being able to feast on meat so fine that a thin layer of oil was left in the wine cups, which they drank from to wash it down, was not something that happened every day.

However, the bread was of fairly poor quality.

It was said that a nation's health could be measured by its bread. This was because, unlike meat, grains like wheat and rye were easy to preserve and store, so in times of hardship, the better grain would be reserved for future use.

"To think that my first customers in such a long time would have such great appetites! Surely this is the will of God!"

The tavern master's words were an obvious exaggeration, but the tavern was indeed only half full, and most of those were only drinking.

They all appeared to be locals, roughly half craftsmen and half small-scale merchants and peddlers.

There did not appear to be anybody from companies whose headquarters were abroad, probably because showing off their prosperity would only earn them the ire of the people in town.

Of course, for a traveler, the opposite was true. Once Lawrence generously treated the other patrons to meat and wine, the fat and liquor became perfect social lubricants.

"Just look at this lifeless tavern! Hey, you lot! This is how you eat and drink, by God!"

"Ah, shut up, old man! You're the one who always skips the wine and drinks the watery ale they brew right over a dirt floor!"

"Aye! I hear you put so many beans on your bread it drives your wife to tears!"

The tavern master and his regulars traded jabs and then immediately burst into laughter.

When times were hard, it was easy for town dwellers to feel as though the world itself were ending. But when a well-to-do traveler appeared, it could bring them hope that all was not yet lost—or so Lawrence had heard from town merchants in the past.

"By the by, where'd you come from, traveler?" asked the tavern master as he brought the pickled cabbage-and-mutton stew Lawrence had ordered to break the monotony of the endless roast meat.

The master did not bother asking Holo, not because she appeared to be a young girl, but rather because she was devouring mutton at such a rate that the other patrons were standing around her, cheering her on.

"From Kerube across the sea. Before that we were still farther south."

"Kerube, eh? I hear there was quite the hubbub there. What was it again...? Hey, Hans! What happened in Kerube, again?"

"The narwhal, wasn't it? Hey, aren't tavern keepers supposed to be good with gossip? Anyway, I hear they caught a big devil in their nets, turned into a real problem. Last time I was at the docks, the boys from the Lyon Company were talking about it."

It was truly amazing how quickly information could cross the sea. It had only been a few days since the events in question had happened.

"That's right, the narwhal. Was that really true?"

The tavern master's face was full of interest. He would never have imagined the one responsible for the situation's sudden reversal was standing right in front of him.

Lawrence glanced at Holo to share a private smile with her, but found himself totally ignored. Had he looked to Col, he was sure the boy would have returned the smile of co-conspirators who shared a secret.

If asked which of his traveling companions he was more inclined to show kindness to, well—it hardly bore asking.

"Yes, it was true. It was such a crisis that the town was split in two over it, north and south. In the end, a single company brought several crates of gold coins to the church and loudly demanded the narwhal be sold to them. Thanks to all the commotion, it was impossible to enjoy any time in the town."

"Oh ho, crates full of gold coin, eh?" The surrounding patrons reacted most strongly to that part of the story. It revealed all too clearly where their current interests lay. "And you say you came all the way up here from south of Kerube? For trade?"

"No, we're on pilgrimage to Brondel Abbey."

Given how keen their reaction to any news of coin was,

Lawrence avoided the topic of money. From what he could tell, he guessed most of the patrons were merchants or craftsmen. If talk turned to business, not only would the conversation cease to progress, but they would surely start trying to sell him their goods.

"Ah, Brondel Abbey..."

"Difficult though it may be to believe, my two traveling companions are indeed children of God. I've been moved to repent and try to atone for my past sins."

"I see. Still, to think a merchant would be making a pilgrimage to Brondel Abbey... such irony," said the tavern master to the other patrons, having at some point gotten a cup of wine for his own hand. He grinned sardonically, as did his customers.

Lawrence did his very best to play the ignorant traveler.

"Why is that ironic?"

"Well, only because Brondel Abbey is cleverer with business than you might think and hasn't treated pilgrims properly in many years. Most foreign travelers to the abbey come through this town, and we've seen many of them returning with disappointed faces."

"They're supposed to pay for the upkeep of inns and roads for pilgrims, but the amount they contribute is piddling compared with the money they bring in from the wool trade. Even a child can see which way the scales tilt. May God's protection be upon us!"

The patron seemed to be a merchant, and at his words, the tavern master nodded firmly.

Be it trading company or abbey, when it came time to turn a profit, the methods they used were much the same. It was crucial to conduct the most profitable business with the most profitable partners.

But in doing so, much was lost.

"It's thanks to their actions that we're suffering God's punishment! These last few years, wool sales in Winfiel have somehow dropped, and it's Brondel Abbey that's suffered the most. Even merchants more meek than any sheep have stopped coming to them, and even if they start begging for tithes now, all those pilgrims they drove away aren't coming back."

"And if after all that a foreign merchant is coming as a pilgrim, maybe this is the limit of their punishment. Serves them right, I say!"

Given how deeply people revered places of worship, their reactions when their faith was abused were that much more violent. Each of the tavern's patrons was all too happy to speak ill of the abbey.

Given that, Lawrence was sure it would not be difficult to get them to talk about the Ruvik Alliance.

"So that's how it is...So does that mean nobody visits the abbey at all anymore?" asked Lawrence, at which the tavern master's expression turned complicated, looking both pleased and helpless.

But he could not say what he was feeling. Lawrence could tell that much.

Brondel Abbey was still an important center for the town and for the nation—a symbol of their faith.

"Not at all. Even now, merchants gather there. Though they are of a rather different kind. Have you ever heard of the Ruvik Alliance?"

Holo ceased biting into her mutton and sipped her wine as though taking a short break—though her actions were no coincidence. She could tell the lively chatter had come to an end.

"That's the largest and most famous economic alliance in the world, is it not?"

"Indeed it is. Evidently their people are visiting the abbey in

great numbers. At first it was their leaders, riding in black carriages, but apparently the abbey winter was too much for them to endure, and merchants coming on foot replaced them. I hear they come and go constantly, each trying to be the first to strike a deal. This year they've passed right by all the taverns, grim-faced as they go."

"What kind of deal are they trying to make?" This would be the rest of the story Lawrence had heard from Deutchmann, but what came out of the tavern master's mouth next was utterly surprising.

"Don't laugh now, but I hear they're trying to buy the golden sheep."

Lawrence got the feeling he could hear Holo's ears prick to attention beneath her hood.

Lawrence himself looked the tavern master disbelievingly in the face.

"The story comes up whenever times are hard. The fields of Brondel Abbey are vast, and when they're covered in snow, the whiteness extends as far as you can see. Legend has it that at the very edge there's a sheep as brilliantly golden as the newly risen sun."

"The story goes that a man once managed to pluck a bit of wool from it, but that the moment the wool was plucked it turned into pure light and vanished."

It was true enough that such stories did circulate.

Nowhere was the ground more fertile for miraculous stories than a nation beset by war or hardship—tales of statues of the Holy Mother weeping, witches' grins splitting from ear to ear as they stole children, or the symbol of the Church appearing on a great flag in the sky.

Even across the sea on the continent there were people who had heard the tale of the golden sheep of Brondel Abbey.

It was quite a convenient legend to cling to in times of great difficulty.

"They're probably trying to buy the abbey's name, or its land..."

"I heard a rumor the Ruvik Alliance is trying to become Winfiel's new nobility."

"But King Sufon's the grandson of the great Winfiel the First. He won't just stand by and allow his own retainers to be bought off. There once was a merchant who bought himself the name of a fallen noble family, and the king's anger was such that his decrees ruined the merchant's wool trade—and then *this*." The patron drew a finger across his neck in a familiar gesture for beheading.

Lawrence realized the merchant had to have been the former husband of someone he knew quite well.

"There's no money, but taxes keep going up, though I suppose it's *because* there is no money that his reaction is so excessive."

"You're good customers, so I'll tell you something. If you're going to the abbey, watch yourselves. Demons have taken up within the house of God. The God that should have been coming to our aid has been lost on the vast plains for long time now."

Lawrence couldn't tell whether they were speaking ill of the abbey or of the Ruvik Alliance. Maybe they did not know themselves.

Maybe they did not care as long as they had something to complain about. But no matter the target of their complaints, it was clear they did not truly hate them.

The Ruvik Alliance and the Winfiel monarchy were entities far beyond their own positions, and even if it had fallen, Brondel Abbey was still viewed with respect.

These nebulous contradictions were all too clear to Lawrence. And because they were so clear, Lawrence understood well just how difficult the tavern's patrons' lives were.

"Thank you. We'll be very careful."

"Aye. Other than that, you'd best eat and drink such that you've energy to spare. The moment you leave the town, it's naught but snowy fields. Without enough energy, you'll never make it across!"

The tavern's noise level rose with the tavern master's pronouncement, and Lawrence raised his cup.

Col seemed to be at his limit, though Holo was still ready to go.

The great Brondel Abbey out on the snow-strewn plains.

Indeed, they would need to eat plenty while they could.

There was a *tik, tik* sound.

It sounded like the crackling of burning firewood. But wait, no—no bonfire had been started the previous night. Ah, of course—the fireplace.

And yet despite that realization, the sound was odd.

Lawrence finally opened his eyes and raised his head. Given the still dim room, he knew the hour was yet early, and from the light that entered through the window, he could tell whether the weather outside was clear or not.

The day unfortunately seemed to be a cloudy one. The moment he thought to himself, *Seems cold*, the frigid air he inhaled through his nose roused him mercilessly to total wakefulness.

It was cold in the room, despite the sound of the crackling firewood.

"Snow, eh?" he muttered, then yawned hugely and sat up.

It had been a long time since he had slept so soundly, thanks to the impressive warmth provided by the wool quilt.

Holo seemed fast asleep, the fluffed-up quilt rising and falling with her breath.

And yet it was *cold*.

Lawrence felt as though ice had been left on his face. He looked at Col, who like Holo seemed to be curled up and sleeping, entirely covered by his quilt.

Evidently Lawrence was the only one who had slept with his face exposed.

He rubbed his frigid face and exhaled whitely. Getting out of bed, he shivered and walked over to the room's table, then swirled the water jug there experimentally.

He had not hoped for much, and the water in the metal jug was frozen solid.

"Suppose I'll have to go downstairs..."

Since beginning his travels with Holo, he had talked to himself much less, but sometimes it still happened. He added some straw to the still faintly flickering fire, and once it flared up, he put another piece of firewood in.

The bricks of the lovely brick fireplace seemed cold enough to put the fire out.

Having confirmed that the firewood was well and truly burning, Lawrence left the room.

The hallway was utterly quiet. Either for want of guests or simply because of the early hour, the silence seemed to swallow all sound.

He was not concerned about the creaking of the floorboards as he walked.

This silence, as though the world were wrapped in cotton, was unique to newly fallen snow.

When he reached the ground floor, he saw that the front door was still barred, and the inn was not yet open for business.

Then he thought he heard the sound of a door opening come from the end of the hallway that continued on to the courtyard. When he looked, he saw the innkeeper, red-nosed and wearing a scarf wrapped about his neck and carrying a barrel.

"Goodness, you're up early."

"Good morning to you."

"My, but it's cold! Took some effort to break through the ice in the well. Looks like the lid's coming down starting today."

The innkeeper carried the barrel in and then poured its contents into a jug at the end of the hall.

Keeping water available was a constant problem for those who lived in colder climes. It seemed ironic to Lawrence that there would be snow falling and yet water was still a concern.

"The lid?"

"Oh, that's what we say around here when we're covered in snow. Everything turns white in single day."

"I see."

"So, what shall I get you? I can make some breakfast for my guests, though it'll take some time."

"We're fine for breakfast. To be honest, we brought home quite a bit from the tavern last night."

Things had gotten so raucous at the tavern that eventually the town guard had come by, and Lawrence had gotten their leftovers packed up to take with them.

Everything was of the finest quality, and heated beside the fireplace it would make for an excellent breakfast.

"Ha-ha-ha! I suppose you've got to eat such good mutton while you've got the chance, eh?"

"Indeed. Ah, but if you could get us some water—"

"Yes, of course. Ah, I suppose the water in your metal pitcher would be solid as a rock. I'll bring a box of sawdust up later. Keep it in that and it'll resist the cold a little better."

"Ah, thank you."

After receiving an earthenware jug of water from the innkeeper, Lawrence returned to the room.

It seemed to him that "putting the lid on" was an apt phrase for snowfall. Once long ago, while drinking cheap liquor at a meager lodge one cold night, he seemed to remember a mercenary saying something similar.

The man had said that if you had to go to war, the northlands

were the place to do it, where the snow would cover all the pain and suffering.

Snow made people sentimental.

Lawrence smirked wryly at the notion and then opened the door to his room. "Oh, you're awake—"

He cut himself off the moment he realized the mood in the room.

Holo sat on the bed, staring out the open window.

She was totally motionless, looking straight ahead, and but for the white exhalations of her breath, she could easily have been mistaken for a clay statue.

Lawrence entered the room and closed the door behind him, but Holo continued to gaze outside.

The wood was still crackling away in the fireplace, but Lawrence added another piece.

He set the water jug on the table and then walked over to Holo's bed.

"'Tis snow," said Holo, still not looking at him.

Lawrence did not answer immediately, following her gaze before saying, "Indeed," and sitting beside her.

Holo continued to stare out the window.

Her legs were not crossed, nor did she hug her knees as she gazed silently outward, as though she had been left in some particular moment.

Lawrence's sigh mingled with the chill air that poured in through the open window, and he placed his hand on her head.

Her beautiful hair felt like so many strands of ice.

Lawrence knew all too well what Holo must have been thinking about as she looked out over the snow.

So rather than hugging her close, he simply stayed there.

"..."

"What's wrong?"

Holo look at him wordlessly.

She no longer wore the blank expression, with which she'd looked out the window; her still face was filled with pathos.

Her cold, thin lips, too, had regained some of their softness.

"I see even you can manage some kindness after all," she said.

"You'll catch cold," said Lawrence instead of giving her a proper reply, at which Holo nodded.

The very next instant, she sneezed, then immediately dove back under her quilt. Lawrence stood and closed the window.

"Were I in my true form, I could gaze at the snow for as long as I liked."

"No doubt you'd become covered in snow as you watched," said Lawrence. Holo smiled and pointed to the water jug.

Lawrence gave it to her, and with her other hand, she took his.

"I told you snow was no great problem, did I not?" she said with a faint half smile.

For her, snow was no occasion for play.

In the village of Pasloe, where she had stayed for centuries, it did not snow—unlike her homelands of Yoitsu.

Lawrence held her cold hand and answered, "I wonder about that. You're hardly a weeping, frail maiden after all—you might well go dashing happily off over the snow at any moment."

"..."

Holo smiled wordlessly, then sat up and put the jug to her lips.

Immediately thereafter, her smile turned to a glare. "This is no wine."

"You fool," said Lawrence, imitating her particular tone, which made her force the jug back into his hand and then flop sulkily back onto the bed.

"So you're going to sleep, then? Breakfast is going to be rather magnificent today."

Snow made one sentimental.

And yet it was just as true that good food improved any mood.



* * *

Perhaps it should have been unsurprising, given that they were in sheep-farming territory.

Along with the leftover mutton that had been packed up for them was an unfamiliar leather pouch, which turned out to be packed full with butter.

A very pleased Holo spread it upon her rye bread before stuffing the bread in her mouth, while Col, smaller of appetite and particularly so in the morning, could only look on queasily.

"Sho, wha' shall whe do nexsht?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full. Given that Deutchmann said he would introduce us to a trading company affiliated with the Ruvik Alliance, we'll simply wait for them to contact us."

"Mm...mmph." Taking a breath after finally swallowing her mouthful of rye bread, she then opened her mouth. Lawrence thought she was about to speak, but she simply took another huge bite.

"Are you planning to hibernate anytime soon?"

"That migh' no' be sush a ba' idea."

It was impossible to talk to Holo while she was preoccupied with tasty food.

Lawrence put some fireplace-warmed mutton between slices of bread and took a bite.

"But it's already so cold—it'll be hard to travel with the snow, won't it?" said Col as he put a cup of warm sheep's milk to his lips after happily watching Lawrence and Holo's exchange.

"True. What did you do when you were traveling alone?"

"When I first left home, it was a good season for travel...and I decided to avoid traveling through places where it seemed like it would snow, since it suddenly got very cold once I crossed the Roam River."

"Indeed. In those clothes of yours, it'd be up to God's grace whether you woke up or not after getting snowed upon."

Lawrence plucked a bit of mutton fat off of Col's face, and the boy grinned sheepishly, though it was unclear whether his embarrassment was over his clothes or the scrap of food on his face.

"Still, there's a certain amount of preparation done along routes that can expect snow. Signposts are erected at set intervals, and there are small way houses placed at distances where even in deep snow, a traveler could expect to reach them. The blizzards around Arohitostok are indeed terrible, but thanks to the weather there are no bandits, and the bears and wolves stay holed up in their dens so travel was surprisingly easy."

"You've even been to Arohitostok? Isn't that the northernmost town of all?"

"Just once, to deliver the personal things of a traveler who passed away. It's northwest of even the Dolan Plains. I saw the land there as smooth and flat as a calm sea. It was an amazing sight."

It was said that the land had been stripped bare by the great wind caused by a dragon that flew up to the ends of the sky, with grass and trees alike uprooted.

Owing to all the snow that fell on the nearby village of Arohitostok, it was extremely dry despite the cold, which made for a strange landscape.

It was where Lawrence first learned what it meant for a place to have truly nothing.

"They say Saint Alagia spent thirty years as an ascetic there... If that's true, then he's a saint, no mistaking it."

"Wow...," breathed Col in wonderment.

Lately Holo's mood had been turning sour after meals, but it could not be helped. She would not listen to Lawrence like this, the way Col did, and so his treatment of her naturally differed.

Hopefully God would forgive him.

"In school, I learned the names of towns all over the world, but I've been to so few of them myself..."

"That's true of people everywhere. I've only rarely joined caravans or traveled fixed trade routes—that's why I've traveled so far and seen so much."

"Have you been to any towns in the south?"

"I expect you're more familiar with the south than I am. I've gone east, as well—"

Just then Lawrence stopped, but it was not because Holo was about to start crying from having been so thoroughly left out of the conversation.

It was because there was a knock at the door.

"Coming!" said Col energetically, jumping out of his chair. He had gotten quite used to handling such minor duties.

Holo continued eating her breakfast, but it was obvious that she was in a foul temper; despite the arrival of a guest, she had not put her hood up.

Lawrence reverently took her hood and placed it over her head.

"Who is it, please?" Col opened the door, and there stood a man wrapped entirely in heavy clothing, in a manner reminiscent of Eve.

A turban covered his head, and he wore two long coats, each reaching to his ankles. Animal hides that still held their fur covered his shins, and he had a large burlap sack over his shoulder.

He seemed ready for a long march through the snow, but there was already snow on his head and shoulders. It seemed very likely that he had just arrived, and after casting his gaze this way and that from under the scarf around his head, he began unwrapping it.

"Is this the room of Mr. Kraft Lawrence?" The voice was surprisingly youthful, and the face beneath the turban was the face of a young man.

"That's right. I am Lawrence."

"Oh, well then! I apologize for my appearance. I received word from Mr. Deutchmann, you see—"

Lawrence stood from his chair and walked to the door.

If he had come at Deutchmann's invitation, then he was from the Ruvik Alliance.

"Not at all, not at all. We're the ones who should've paid a visit to you. In any case, please do come in."

"If you'll excuse the intrusion, then."

The man was a bit shorter than Lawrence, and he entered the room with light footsteps, despite the heavy load and clothing that should have precluded such lightness.

If he was a traveling merchant, he was one who traveled harsh climes indeed.

"What a lovely room."

"Normally we cannot afford such niceties."

"Ha-ha-ha, benefits of the job, eh? I enjoyed the same thing myself when I came at the beginning of autumn."

The man had blond hair cropped quite short. His manner of speaking was pleasant and good-natured—enough so to surprise Holo, it seemed.

"Ah, I've forgotten to introduce myself. I am Lag Piasky of the Fias Company, affiliated with the Ruvik Alliance."

"And I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trade Guild. Normally I'm a traveling merchant on the continent."

"Ah, this is surely God's will—as you can see, I, too, am a traveling merchant."

After exchanging pleasantries, they shook hands, and Lawrence was relieved to note that the man's hands were about as rough as his own.

Holo had taken her breakfast and moved to the bed, so after inviting Piasky to sit, Lawrence sat himself.

"What I've heard from Mr. Deutchmann is that you wish to visit Brondel Abbey."

This statement did not strike Lawrence as hasty. Rather he seemed to be a sort of man that Lawrence had rarely encountered recently—a merchant who if he had time to be exchanging friendly greetings with other people would rather use that time to shave the edges off of silver coins.

"Yes—if possible, we'd like to visit the merchant house that's closer to the main building rather than the pilgrimage house."

Lawrence said nothing about their search for the wolf bones.

Unlike previously, when they had had no idea where the bones actually were, they now possessed the important information that the bones were likely within the abbey. There was nothing to be gained in letting slip that information.

And Piasky was from the Ruvik Alliance.

"... As you were introduced by Mr. Deutchmann, I won't inquire as to your goal, but given what you've said, I assume you're not here to purchase wool." Piasky's eyes looked steadily at Lawrence. Piasky's reaction was hardly surprising—after all, Lawrence was seeking a guide to the abbey while refusing to say why.

But Lawrence did not falter. He was sure that having gained Deutchmann's trust via Kieman and Eve, he could gain Piasky's via Deutchmann.

Trust was the invisible currency.

Piasky finally smiled and continued, "Still, I do a bit of business guiding to the annex those interested in watching our skirmishing with the abbey, so I won't press you. Besides, whenever people gather, that's draw enough to bring still more people in."

One couldn't do business alone. Nowhere was more attractive to a merchant than a place where many merchants gathered.

And business was always more profitable if one didn't carelessly spill one's plans. Piasky certainly knew that much.

"The banner of the moon and shield will always fly in the wind, so I won't worry about such minor details, eh?"

Lawrence did not neglect to inwardly add the statement that implicitly followed that one: *But if you interfere with our business, we will spare you no mercy.*

"Thank you very much. I'll make sure your consideration is a good one."

Piasky's smile at hearing this was a bright one, proving that he was indeed a real merchant.

Lawrence shook hands with him again, formalizing their contract for the time being.

"Now, then, as I am a rather impatient person, I'd like to discuss our departure. May I assume both your companions will be coming along as well?"

"Yes. Will that make us unable to use the pretense of wool buying?"

Col was one thing, but Holo in no way resembled any sort of merchant.

"Hardly. It's not uncommon to bring a member of the clergy along on a business venture for the sake of one's spiritual tranquility, after all. And things at the merchant branch of the abbey are quite lively at the moment, so it's unlikely your companions will be noticed, no matter who they are. So long as we can pass through the gates, we'll have no troubles."

"I see, good." Lawrence made certain to act especially relieved.

He wasn't particularly trying to deceive Piasky—but the man's manner was so easy and pleasant, Lawrence was careful to remain on his guard.

"So, about our departure..."

"We can leave any time."

"I see... actually, as I function as the agent between the abbey

and a mainland trade house, I estimate that there's some value in setting out as quickly as may be possible."

His faintly sarcastic way of speaking seemed to be a deliberate parody of the roundabout manner of the people of Winfiel.

Lawrence looked at Holo and Col.

Both of them nodded that they were ready.

"Since this is all at our behest, we're happy to leave immediately."

"I appreciate that. I'd like to try to embark around the midday bell."

"And will we travel on foot?"

"No, by horse. Though the snow is yet thin here, toward the abbey it's gotten rather deep. I'll make arrangements for the horses myself, but please bring your own rations. Oh, and also—" Piasky smiled and added one final statement very deliberately. "—There's no need to change your coin into the local stuff."

The first thing a traveling merchant did in a new region was exchange his money.

Lawrence made no attempt to hide his laughter at Piasky's joke, a joke that only a fellow traveling merchant would make.

CHAPTER TWO



Col sat ahead and Lawrence was the farthest back. Between them was Holo, and even so the horse atop whose back they all sat had strength to spare.

The long-haired steeds that pulled sleighs across the plains of Winfiel were every bit as big as the rumors claimed.

"Hmph... awfully arrogant for a mere horse."

Such were the words that Holo let slip upon seeing the mounts that Piasky had made ready for them at their meeting place.

Of course, Holo's true form was far larger than even this horse.

Holo's grumbling was likely rooted in her frustration at her own ignorance—the limitations of her own knowledge compared with the vastness of the world.

On the continent, horses like this one were hardly a common sight.

"Are you all prepared?" Piasky asked, holding the reins while atop a more common horse.

Lawrence replied that they were. The only reason he, too, did not have reins in his hand was because the packhorse's driver held them.

A horse of such size would be wasted if it were merely being

ridden. Even a mule that looked like it would run short of breath carrying a child could haul the baggage of four people, as long as it was properly loaded.

Lawrence looked back and saw a cart piled high with goods. Among them was food and wine for the abbey's merchant branch. Evidently once the roads were covered in snow, wagons were traded for sleighs.

Piasky's role was to mediate between the abbey and the continental trade companies, facilitating the flow of information as well as goods such as these.

"Now, then, let us pray to God for safe travels."

As befitted a trip to an abbey, they gave such prayers as the midday bell rang and then set off.

The weather was poor and temperatures very low.

Worse, the snow hadn't quite covered the town and instead mixed with the road's dirt, becoming mud that dirtied the cuffs of all who walked it.

But they left the town and continued on across the harvested plains, which were nearly entirely white.

It was scenery worthy of the "nation of plains," for so it was called, and no matter the direction one looked, the white expanse stretched on and on, and they followed a path of dirt churned up by the feet of humans and horses that sliced through it.

Everyone was wearing many layers of clothing. Lawrence and his companions even wore thick leather overcoats they had borrowed from the inn, as well as gloves.

But sitting still atop a horse as they traveled over such land, the cold inevitably found its way past their coats. Eventually Holo enveloped Col within her own coat, and Lawrence drew Holo into his.

Silence reigned over their travel. The only sounds were the *tik, tik* of snowflakes hitting coats and the long, reluctant breaths of

cold air they drew into their lungs, that sound magnified by the silence.

People of the north country spoke little, and what they did speak was uttered through lips barely parted, it was said—and Lawrence could easily understand why.

And of all the various restrictions that monks imposed on themselves during their pilgrimages, the rule of silence was the easiest to comprehend.

Thanks to the snow, darkness fell early, and though their travels had not been lengthy, Lawrence and his companions were exhausted by the time they reached the first inn.

A famous monk had once said that idle chatter was a pleasure, and the truth of those words was entirely clear.

And yet Lawrence, Col, and Holo were laypeople, not clergy.

The least clergy-like of them, Holo, seemed most affected by the monotonous silence, and upon reaching the room, she fell straight onto the bed, not even bothering to brush the snow from her hood.

For his part, Lawrence was in no mood to chastise her. He was sure his face looked no better than Col's, who sat exhausted on a chair.

It was the face of one whose energy reserves were gone, but if told to stand and walk, he would struggle to his feet and continue trudging forward—the face of one whose spirit had given out ahead of his body.

In the northlands, there were many tales of the wandering dead, no doubt from people catching sight of travelers in such a state.

"Col."

After Lawrence said the boy's name, Col looked up at him with a corpse-like expression.

"If you smile, you'll feel better."

Col had traveled alone and was surely aware of that particular trick. He nodded and forced a smile.

"Now, then, let us go get dinner. I expect Piasky has arranged to have it served."

"All right," replied Col, standing.

As the boy obediently removed his snow-covered coat, Lawrence took Holo's cloak as she continued to lie facedown and motionless on the bed.

"I'm sure you know this, but you won't be able to sleep like that. You'll feel better if you go someplace warm and drink some wine."

Drowsiness and exhaustion were similar but different.

Holo's drooping ears twitched, as though to say, "I know, I know."

But despite knowing, she made no move to rise, like a person unwilling to leave their warm bed in the morning.

With no other option, Lawrence picked her up and saw that the expression on her face was like a girl cursed to sleep until some hero came to awaken her with a kiss.

Lawrence, of course, was no hero.

A different sort of magic would be required to break the curse on Holo.

"I hear the liquor here is such that a simple spark will set it aflame," he whispered into her drooping ears, which pricked up into sharp triangles.

It was as though she were asking, "Truly?"

"Weak liquor soon freezes and becomes undrinkable, so they make it strong enough to store in ice and remain unfrozen. And though it's colder than ice, drinking the burning stuff will warm you right up."

A bit of sparkle returned to Holo's eyes.

She gulped, the sound of her swallowing signaling the breaking of the curse.

Holo stood unsteadily, a bit of strength returning to her tail, which had drooped like the tail of a stray dog that had not eaten in three days.

"Still, we may only have pickled cabbage to go with it," Lawrence made sure to say, hoping to head off her anger at discovering as much after the fact.

Holo seemed briefly unsteadied by this qualification, but the allure of the liquor was evidently enough for her to regain her vigor.

"'Tis better than nothing."

"That's the spirit."

Their exchange as they left the room made Lawrence think of something. The strong liquor they had drunk at a town they had stopped at earlier in their journey had reminded Holo of her homeland's wine.

If strong liquor reminded Holo of home, that would certainly be a singular flavor. What better nourishment could there be when one was so exhausted?

Evidently it would take roughly two more days to reach Brondel Abbey.

Lawrence counted the coins in his coin purse, careful not to let Holo notice him doing this.

A way station's food is expensive, poor, and foul-smelling.

Even a piece of scripture fit for a child to memorize was not as easily remembered as that truism.

And as though trying to live up to those words, the smell of dishes on the table next to them wafted over, rank and garlic-smelling.

The smell of garlic was synonymous with poverty. Despite Lawrence being sure he and his companions tended to eat thriftily, it

was times like this when the ill effects of extravagance were laid bare.

The only one whose stomach growled at the prospect of the food at the next table over was Col, who until recently had traveled by gnawing on meager turnips.

It had been a long time since Lawrence had encountered this scent, but he still could not muster much appetite at its prospect—to say nothing of the keen-nosed Holo.

But Lawrence and his companions were lucky, not because they had plenty of money and not because the way station's kitchen had run out of garlic.

They were lucky because Piasky had anticipated this happening and taken matters into his own hands.

"Since I travel quite a lot in the northlands, I often wind up having to stop over because of the snow. Helping out with the cooking has gotten me not half bad at it," he said, then placed a simple mutton stew in the center of the table—"simple" being a salt broth with onions, ginger, and turnips, along with some mutton jerky and leg bone all boiled together.

But of course, there was one special, crucial ingredient hidden among all that.

Piasky lowered his voice before revealing the secret ingredient, which turned out to be the very same thing that the people at the next table were so reluctantly eating: garlic.

Evidently a small amount of garlic was very important for this stew, with its thin skim of yellow oil covering the surface of the broth.

The stew was served in a well-used, old wooden bowl, garnished with a piece of oat bread that by itself looked like it would have been tough to chew—but it was meant to be soaked in the warm stew broth before eating. This allowed even the famously difficult-to-chew oat bread to be enjoyed.

Lawrence was deeply grateful to Piasky, not only because the food was delicious, but also because it distracted Holo from the liquor they had been discussing.

"In places where there are no rivers or ponds, the water you carry with you tends to turn rancid, but if you mix it with ingredients like these and boil the lot of it, even bad water is all right."

Holo gnawed away on the mutton, wooden spoon in hand. She was already on her third bowl. Even the usually restrained Col went in for seconds—proof of how tasty the stew really was.

"It would be amazing if you could make stew this delicious from even rancid water... But this is only practical when you're traveling in numbers, I would think. If you made this all the time while traveling alone, it would surely be a waste of money."

"Right you are. When I was younger and traveling hither and yon with caravans, I often had cooking duties foisted upon me."

Traveling with a large group of merchants was good for business and made for a safer journey. But Piasky's affect had the keen edge of a man well accustomed to traveling alone. The impression Lawrence had immediately gotten from him was that of a solitary merchant scaling a steep cliff.

This was evidently something people often told Piasky. He explained, "Of course, that's all in the past. A group of merchants is after all only a group. It's not a family."

"Whenever a crisis comes, they'll only offer you a helping hand if they've decided there's some profit in it for them."

Piasky's lips twisted. "Quite right," he said with a helpless shrug.

Before he had begun sitting alone in the driver's seat of his cart, Lawrence had occasionally traveled with other merchants, and when business was good, he had stayed with the same group for a while.

As to why he'd stopped doing it—it was probably overstatement

to suggest that relationships formed solely for profit were doomed to distort into resentment, but his reason was likely the same as Piasky's.

When his group had been attacked by wolves, they all fled, each praying to God that it would be one of the others who was caught.

And when one of them finally drew the losing lot, Lawrence wondered just how much God's heart was stirred by their desperate cries for help.

"Also, I was well aware that even a group of traveling merchants have no hope against the merchants of a town. So in the end I decided to become the hand of one of those town merchants. I'm less free than I was, but in every town where we have influence, I'm greeted with smiles. It's worthy compensation."

Holo had started drinking her liquor, but surely not because she was full.

Piasky's words had undoubtedly given her much to consider. Anyone who lived a life of travel, even Col, could understand what he was talking about.

"On that count, if you're with the Ruvik Alliance, the compensation would be great indeed."

"Exactly so. And the scale of my business has expanded as well."

"I see. Though it doesn't seem to have dulled your cooking skills a bit... ah, apologies. Your life as a traveler doesn't match your great skill at cooking."

"Ha-ha-ha. I hear that a lot. The truth is I still prepare meals for groups of people while traveling. As I'm doing right now, in fact."

It was said that sightseers flocked to Brondel Abbey. But Piasky's manner didn't suggest that his side business of guiding visitors to the abbey was exactly flourishing. He had introduced himself as a messenger and courier in the employ of the Ruvik Alliance.

Which meant the remaining possibilities were few.

"Heh-heh. Every merchant worth his salt ends up asking me that question, Mr. Lawrence. And I always answer the same way." He smiled cheerfully and then swept his gaze across Holo and Col before continuing theatrically, "My journey's only just begun! I still have plenty of time to think."

A merchant without curiosity was like a clergyman without faith, so such a statement, despite its triviality, was guaranteed to fan Lawrence's interest.

At the very least, thinking it over would be a good way to kill time while on the back of a horse in the freezing silence.

"Incidentally, it's not as though I'm always going to Brondel Abbey."

No doubt these mealtime guessing games were part of Piasky's appeal on the long, boring journeys. His expression made it look as though he was proudly showing off a piece of merchandise, and the audience was certainly taking the bait.

Holo pretended to continue eating as though having no interest in such frivolity, but in actuality the meat on her plate was not decreasing at all, while the more honest Col gripped his spoon and stared intently at the grain of the table's wood.

No doubt this all made Piasky the entertainer very happy.

In contrast to that, it seemed only Lawrence was troubled.

If only an experienced merchant would look at Piasky and ask the same questions Lawrence had, then it would take the same kind of person to be able to answer those questions.

And even if the answer was something that would incite a smile, Piasky would not know what part of it would do so. So for Lawrence, the answer was a bit troubling.

"Well, I can't have you up all night trying to work out the answer. I'll be happy to give it to you whenever you like."

Piasky's insistence was more than enough to deepen the furrows on the brows of Lawrence's two companions.



If Lawrence didn't say something, then there was no telling how long the two of them would be agonizing over it.

"Besides, thinking it over will only empty your stomach, and finding the answer won't fill it back up again."

The prospect of a hungry journey worked quite well to snap them out of their reverie, and the two resumed eating.

Lawrence met Piasky's eyes and smiled slightly. After all, a pleasant meal was always welcome.

"Would that Brondel Abbey were at the edge of the world."

"Even I don't have that many riddles."

That evening, they laughed, ate, and drank into the night.

The next day saw large puffs of snowflakes falling.

Mercifully there was no wind, but with heavy snowfall of flakes as big as a thumbnail, visibility was extremely poor.

With their hoods pulled down nearly over their eyes, their white breath fogged up what little was left of their fields of view.

And yet it was far from rare to find a crusty old merchant with failing eyes who nonetheless had a perfect grasp of the complicated web of trade routes he used. So it was with their packhorse driver, a man who had been plying these roads for forty years, and for whom the current poor visibility was barely worthy of mention. The taciturn horseman led the cart horse out of the way station and out across the white plains, his gait sure.

As even a brief stop would result in them becoming quickly covered by snow, there was no rest in the march.

But the white scenery was so ceaselessly monotonous that after taking a brief lunch atop the horse, Col dozed off.

A horse's back was still a good distance from the ground. If Col fell, he risked serious injury, so Lawrence took out some hemp rope he had prepared just in case and started to loop it around Holo and Col both when he noticed something.

Holo, who he had assumed was long since asleep, was actually awake and holding Col securely in her arms.

"Oh, you're awake."

The snow deadened sound as well as hurting visibility. Despite the silence, Lawrence could barely hear his own voice. Their conversation would be inaudible to Piasky, who was behind them on another horse.

"I am not," came the hazy reply, which Lawrence very nearly laughed at in spite of himself.

But he knew perfectly well that her answer came from her irritation at Piasky's riddle the previous evening.

It was not something one could simply reason their way through, and even a merchant might not have been able to guess it, depending on the circumstances.

Col had quickly given up and gone to bed, but Holo the Wisewolf seemed to feel obligated to think about it longer.

Yet it was ridiculous to spend all night agonizing over even a great riddle, to say nothing of such a trivial dinnertime puzzle. And not finding the answer was only more frustrating.

Holo's childish irritation would usually drive her to steal meaningful glances in Lawrence's direction, of which he was well aware.

"What? You don't see the answer?" He would laugh, and a pouting Holo would hastily tell him what it was.

That was their usual routine.

But Lawrence had not done that.

He had hoped that Holo would forget about the question entirely. The riddle's answer made him a bit anxious.

Even Lawrence thought he was worrying about it too much, but he ignored Holo's first glance, and then her second. And the third and fourth. At which point Holo was obviously upset as she continued to mull it over. Having gotten to this point, even

a solution with a hilarious twist would only serve to further anger her.

It was harder than ever to tell her the answer.

And so it had gone, right up until the present moment.

Lawrence should have told her the answer right away, but it was too late for such regrets.

"So that's how it is."

The second time Holo spoke that day, what came out of her mouth was a lengthy, irritated sigh of a long and rambling speech, which she wrapped up with these final words.

Col listened, his face blank with astonishment, as he busied himself by hanging their traveling clothes up to dry on a leather cord.

After dinner, just when they'd noticed that Holo had disappeared for a while, she returned to the room and immediately dove into her speech, so Col's reaction was entirely understandable.

For Lawrence's part, he was simply impressed that she'd managed to work it out.

"You're exactly right."

"You fool!"

Lawrence had no excuse to give and could only reply honestly, which earned him an equally honest curse from Holo.

And yet seeing Lawrence look so foolish seemed to take the wind out of Holo's anger's sails.

She sat and asked Col to bring her wine, rudely pulled the cork out with her teeth, and put the contents to her lips.

"Your strange manner made me want to know the answer that much more. And to think..."

"So you went and asked?" Not long ago, Col would have trembled in terror at Holo's anger, but now he was bold enough to venture the question.

"Aye. I went and told him it had kept me up and got laughed at for my trouble. Me—Holo the Wisewolf!"

"I learned at school that there are things you can't learn without asking. But what was the answer?"

Col continued to hang their clothes as he asked the question. Holo did not answer immediately, instead directing her gaze at Lawrence.

"It's too much trouble to explain. You do it," her gaze seemed to say.

Which was probably true.

With a bottle of strong wine in one hand, Holo bit into a piece of jerky.

"A man like Piasky, who's used to traveling alone but also skilled at cooking meals for many people, is quite rare. He must be involved in establishing new towns or marketplaces. When he talked about guiding large groups of people, those people are probably on their way to start new lives in a new place."

"Ooh..."

Despite listening to Lawrence with an impressed expression, Col adroitly finished attending to the drying and then checked in on the sunken hearth in the middle of the room.

There was no fireplace, nor did the room have good circulation, so managing the fire was quite difficult.

"Essentially, the people he's guiding aren't used to traveling. So without the ability to fully equip them all, as well as quickly solve whatever problems arise, he wouldn't be able to do his job."

"In truth, I've led a pack myself, and he looks to be a fine, reliable male. He speaks his mind and speaks it cleverly." Holo glared at Lawrence with half-lidded eyes.

Lawrence coughed. Col smiled nervously and continued.

"So he does a rather uncommon job, then. But then..."

Why was Mr. Lawrence trying to hide the answer to the riddle from Miss Holo?

The question in his eyes was obvious as he looked at Lawrence.

There was nothing so embarrassing as having to admit he had been too worried. But if he didn't accept his punishment, it seemed unlikely that Holo would forgive him.

Of course, he begged forgiveness every single time Holo was angry at him. He could hardly call himself a proper merchant, but here in this room, where the fire had to be kept small lest it fill the space with smoke, the warmth of Holo's tail would be very important during the night.

A merchant had to be able to weigh profit and loss.

"Piasky's job is helping colonists. If he's being helped by a king or the nobility, it's to increase the land they control. If he's backed by the Church, it's to spread their faith. In any case, there are many reasons, but they all have one thing in common. If the colonists arrive at their new land and manage to become established there, it will become their new homeland."

"Ah..."

"The work is difficult but profitable, and if successful will earn the gratitude of many people. I've even heard of such leaders becoming minor nobility themselves, at the request of the villagers or townspeople they aided. But many of those who set out for new lands have lost their homes to war, famine, or disease. So—"

Lawrence looked at Holo before continuing.

"—That's why I was hoping you'd forget the matter."

"Hmph." Holo turned away in irritation, tossing a piece of skin she had torn free of the jerky into the fire. This sent a puff of ash up, which Col followed with his eyes as though witnessing something magical. "'Tis not our way to find a new homeland. Our home is our home. What's important is not who's there, but

where the land itself is. And anyway, I'll bet you were just worried I'd say something like this, aye?"

They had argued countless times.

She had seen right through Lawrence's thinking.

"Could you please find a homeland for me, as well?" she finished, her eyes coquettishly upturned.

Surprised, Col watched the entire exchange.

Lawrence could tell she was angry.

But he also knew her anger was that of a cat who had been fussed over too much and was now holding out a threatening claw.

"Males are such fools!"

"...I cannot argue with that."

"Honestly," Holo spat and then drank her wine.

At a loss, Lawrence brushed his hair aside—this, too, was just as it always was.

Once Col laughed at them in amusement, the ritual was complete.

Holo's tail swished to and fro. Tomorrow would be another early morning.

"I grow weary from anger. To bed with me."

Her skill as a pack leader was impressive, indeed.

In the end, they arrived at Brondel Abbey around midday of the third day.

Perhaps by the grace of God, only the second day had seen heavy snowfall. They passed easily through the checkpoint into the merchants' quarter, which was not necessarily something to be pleased about.

The high walls that enclosed the space were what one would expect of an abbey, but upon entering the gate, the atmosphere was that of a town inhabited only by merchants.

It was enough to make Holo quip, "You should drop a copper coin and see what happens," from atop their horse.

No doubt it would immediately bring all eyes upon them, like a sneeze during the prayer in a church service.

"It's quite possible there's nothing that can't be bought here," said Piasky mischievously, riding his horse alongside them.

Lawrence smiled at that but wondered privately if it might not actually be true.

The center of the street had been somehow cleared of snow, but it was flanked on both sides by piles of the stuff, and unsurprisingly the air around them was as cold as an ice cave. There were even parts of the horse's mane that had frozen.

Despite the cold, merchants were everywhere, arms crossed across their bodies as they each talked up their businesses. Somehow they seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves, even stomping their feet to ward off the cold, unable to resist smiling like children.

"Now, then, if you'll wait here, I'll make arrangements for your room."

"I shall leave it to you."

Piasky tied Lawrence's horse up at a public stable, then dismounted his own steed and trotted off.

Mounting and dismounting a horse took a certain amount of skill, and all the more so when one's body was stiff from cold. Lawrence was the first to climb down, and then he took Holo and then Col in his arms as he helped them off.

Once everyone was on the ground, Lawrence thanked the driver for a safe journey.

The man remained as silent and taciturn as ever, but crossed his arms lightly over his chest and gave a bow in a polite gesture of parting, every bit the image of a devout northerner.

"Still, this place is rather large, is it not? From what you were saying, I thought 'twould be smaller and at more of a remove."

"I only knew it by reputation. But I know it's the place where it's said enough wool to fill the straits of Winfiel is traded. Look there—they even have glass windows."

There, under a lead-gray sky, from which a snowflake occasionally fell as though it had suddenly remembered to fall, were grand three-story buildings of stone with top-floor windows that reflected the sky's color.

Not every building had windows of glass, but each of them seemed sturdy enough to shrug off a few flaming arrows at least. There were five in total on one side of the street or the other, each with wide paths leading from their entrances.

But they were not the only things at the site. There were large public stables, and across from them was a great barn exclusively for sheep. It seemed fully large enough, but Piasky had said there were many more like it.

"Mm. 'Tis quite a feat to build such things out here in the snow." Holo grinned boldly and looked ahead.

There lay the merchant annex to the great abbey of Brondel. While it might well have been merely an annex situated a horse's ride away from the abbey proper, it in no way hurt the majesty of the latter.

At the end of the road that led from the annex's entrance stood a building with a weighty majesty that was greater than any of the others nearby.

Hanging within a steeple so tall it seemed to reach to the heavens themselves was a great bell, larger than even ten horses could hope to move. This was a sanctuary that had been built to bring peace to the souls of merchants. And doubtless it did exactly that.

Although that did come with a sense of overwhelming pressure.

"There's something that I learned in school."

"Oh?"

"That clergy from the northlands are the best at questioning heretics."

Lawrence understood Col all too well. Inquisitors had no mercy. A place like this was indeed well suited to the bearded servants of God, with their eyes as cold and pitiless as hawks'.

"Still, that was long ago, was it not?" Holo's gaze was fixed upon a monk wrapped in more wool than the sheep, chatting happily with a group of merchants as he led them out of the building.

His face was ruddy and his cheeks plump—a far cry from the virtues of obedience, purity, and honorable poverty.

Holo looked at Lawrence and spoke. "Certainly—we live in a time when even you can come on pilgrimage."

Holo smiled a bold, fearless smile that teetered right on the edge of outright laughter.

"...Still, I'm a bit worried," Lawrence said as he looked at the breath that rose whitely as he exhaled, then cast his gaze across their surroundings.

A kick from Holo brought him back to himself, and looking at her angry eyes, he realized he had been misunderstood.

"Ah, sorry, I should've explained better. I wasn't talking about you." She continued to regard him with suspicion so Lawrence elaborated. "I'm a bit worried that there are too many people here."

"Er, do you mean..." It was Col who spoke up.

Given the way he had been gazing curiously around at the scene, it was quite possible he had come to the same conclusion as Lawrence.

"There are too many people for grounds of this size. No matter how grand the buildings might be, a bunch of arrogant merchants and monks with no patience for cramped conditions will never be satisfied with such confined space."

"Do you mean to say there may be no lodging for us?"

If this was meant to be a place to conduct business negotiations,

it would have to have places to store contracts, as well as places to discuss the contents of those contracts. This meant office space and workers to maintain the upkeep of such space. Cooks and food staff would be necessary, too, and the higher the status of the merchants that visited, the larger their entourage would be.

Lawrence doubted that his bad feeling was merely pessimism inspired by the poor weather. It was all too easy to think such things before a monastery devoted to prayer to God.

Lawrence and his companions continued to look around dubiously, and soon there appeared Piasky, trotting out of one of the buildings with—just as Lawrence expected—a concerned expression on his face.

Just as one would expect of a merchant whose swiftness of foot outstripped his skill at negotiation, Piasky immediately cut to the heart of the matter. "I'm very sorry. There are too many people, and I was unable to secure a room."

Despite having anticipated this, Lawrence was not immediately sure how to respond. As he struggled for an answer, Piasky continued.

"You might be able to sleep alongside others in one of the larger rooms..." His words trailed off as his gaze fell upon Holo.

What would happen if Holo were to sleep in a room crowded with merchants? It would be like tossing meat to a pack of wild dogs.

"Alternatively, we might be able to find you an earthen-floor room to rent... but in weather like this, that wouldn't be terribly different from making camp. Ah, what a bother. Apparently over the last couple of days, there's been a surge of people."

"What about stables?"

"They're full all the way to the haylofts. In this time of year, they're even warmer than the inn rooms, after all. And I don't even have to mention the wool storehouses."

Piasky's face fell into deep contemplation, as though he were leading travelers along a road that had been blocked by a landslide and was now impassable.

His concern seemed to be genuine rather than for show. Lawrence could see why Holo had approved of him.

But that did not mean he would be able to fix their situation.

If they were to end up staying in a stone building with an earthen floor, they would need to secure bedding.

Lawrence was about to say so, but before he could, the surroundings seemed to erupt in a great commotion—although upon a second look, it was coming from a particular direction.

"Ho, the White Army returns!" shouted one of the merchants among the many in the street. Lawrence looked in the direction of the noise, and as his line of sight fell upon the entrance to the annex, he understood what the shout meant.

With a low rumble that seemed to shake the ground, a wave of sheep flowed in. Not even a fully armed mercenary band could hold its ground against such a flood.

As the sheep passed through the flung-open gates, they were soon herded by dog and spear into the many barns set aside for them.

Shortly thereafter, there could be heard the bells that so often rang out across the plains as a quartet of shepherds passed through the gates and entered the town. Here they were not loathed as in Ruvinheigen, and the merchants who knew them greeted them happily, petting the heads of the sheepdogs and thanking them for a day's work well done.

The shepherds were certainly a scruffy group. And yet looking at their nonetheless dignified forms, Lawrence couldn't help but think if Norah the shepherdess could find employ in a place like this, she might not suffer so.

"'Tis all too clear what you're thinking about."

At Holo's sudden words, Lawrence snapped back to reality. As he flinched and looked over at her, it was all too clear just who the sheep was.

But Holo seemed to be satisfied with his pathetic reaction, so rather than press her advantage, she spoke with a quiet expression. "Fate is truly a force in the world. The world is too complicated for all to come easily."

"...You're right about that." Any number of their adventures thus far served as evidence.

As they spoke quietly, Lawrence suddenly felt someone's gaze upon him, and he looked up. His eyes fell upon the gates through which the flood of sheep had just finished passing.

With the sheep now inside, the gates were being closed, and calm was beginning to return.

But the shepherds remained.

Lawrence got the feeling that one of them, an old man, was looking at them.

"Scriveners' rooms... no, no... perhaps the storage room at the far end of the hall... or—hmm?" Piasky continued to mull over the problem of Lawrence and his companions' lodgings, but he saw Lawrence's curious look, at which he stopped.

After looking toward the shepherds briefly, he clapped his hands. "That's it. There might be some vacancies in the shepherds' quarters. I've heard they're less busy in the winter—just let me go ask and see."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Piasky ran off.

It was possible that the shepherd Lawrence thought was looking at them had instead been looking past them at the sanctuary. Just as he revised his thinking, Holo glared suspiciously at the shepherds.

"One of those had his eye on us just now."

"I wondered."

Only Col seemed surprised by this, and he looked around nervously.

It was not surprising for unfriendly towns or villages to treat travelers with hostility, but that was not what Lawrence sensed.

"Well, perhaps he simply found you a bit unusual. There are plenty of abbeys with both nuns and monks, but there aren't any nuns here."

"Aye... he was indeed surprised."

"I assume you didn't show your ears or tail," Lawrence said jokingly.

At this Holo drew her chin in and replied with eyes half lidded from boredom. "'Tis not as though there's aught here to make my heart race. My ears and tail are lifeless beneath my robe."

"That's good. I prefer a modest girl."

Holo stomped on Lawrence's foot, and Col turned away, trying to hide his laughter.

Piasky seemed to have successfully negotiated something during the trio's third-rate sideshow. He turned toward them and waved happily in their direction.

"Will you be all right staying in the shepherds' quarters?" Lawrence asked Holo.

"You said you preferred a modest girl, didn't you?"

Lawrence was not worried that she would wither in front of the shepherds as much as he was concerned that her dislike of them would spoil her mood, but she coolly brushed the question off.

And no doubt she would be fine as promised. Holo was not a child after all.

"Well, then, I'd say that's our best choice," said Lawrence, returning Piasky's wave.

But then, to Lawrence's surprise, Piasky exchanged a handshake with the very same old shepherd they had been discussing before.

Evidently the shepherds of the great abbey of Brondel, who still told tales of the golden sheep, would be sharing their lodgings with the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, guardian of the wheat harvest.

Perhaps the world was a more peaceful place than it seemed after all.

"Huskins."

Owing to the sound of their bags hitting the floor, Lawrence nearly missed the man's introduction. Once he realized what it was, he hastily extended his right hand in greeting.

"Kraft Lawrence."

"..."

As he shook hands with Huskins, who stood in the doorway, he noticed the man's hands were as tough as sheep hooves.

"This is Holo. And that's Col. Strange circumstances have led to them traveling with me."

"Pleased to meet you," said Holo.

"And I'm very pleased to meet you, as well," said Col.

As he shook hands with each of them, Huskins the shepherd ultimately said nothing more than his own name.

His hair was the color of hay and snow, with long eyebrows and a beard that nearly reached his chest. He was built solidly, his back not hunched nor his body underfed. The corners of his eyes were deeply wrinkled, and his gray eyes shone as though gazing at a far-off horizon. While surely past his agile years, his movements had a peculiar strength to them and made one think of a wily old ram.

A true herdsman who wandered the plains. A keen-eyed shepherd. There were any number of ways to describe him.

Huskins was such a man, a venerable shepherd whose age gave him a certain aura.

"Thank you so much for this. You've truly helped us."

As Piasky would have it, the shepherds that lived here with Huskins only returned once every few years. As long as Lawrence and his companions were willing to attend to their own meals, they could use the vacant rooms.

Of course, not being an inn, each room did not have its own fireplace—there was a sunken brick hearth shared among the rooms, but even that was far better than sleeping alongside strangers or on a dirt floor in a stone building.

"I'll tend the fire. Aside from that, you're free to do as you will."

It was said that after tending to their vast flocks, enduring harsh conditions day in and day out, shepherds were saintlier than actual saints—and Huskins certainly seemed so.

He did not seem inclined to respond to small talk, nor did he evidently wish to.

Lawrence nodded at what he was told and asked no further questions.

Huskins wordlessly looked the trio over for a moment, gave a brief nod, and then walked back to the room with the hearth.

"Is he a Church scholar?" Col asked quietly as Huskins's footsteps faded away.

It was not unreasonable to think so. Even Lawrence found it easy to imagine himself asking Huskins's advice in times of trouble.

"He does seem like a sort of wilderness wise man, doesn't he?"

"Am I the butt of that joke?" Holo popped a dried raspberry in her mouth as soon as Lawrence opened their bags. Lawrence gave her a mild glance and shrugged purposefully.

"We've more leftovers than I thought. With this much, it should last us a while, even counting for Huskins's portion. And if we run low, we're surrounded by merchants, so it'll hardly be a problem."

"Yes, only the well was very crowded, so water might be a problem."



That was Col—always keeping his eyes open.

When traveling without money, finding water was the highest priority.

Even a little food could be stretched to last a week, but it was not so with water.

"Should we go draw some now maybe?" Col asked.

"Perhaps... yes, go ahead and do that. We'll need it at dinner, and it's possible the well will freeze during the night."

"Right!"

Col seemed to feel most at ease when he had been given a task to complete. He gave his cheerful reply and then took a bucket and water skin before going back out into the cold.

Lawrence next addressed Holo, who quite unlike the industrious Col was lying back on a straw bed, popping dried raspberries into her mouth.

"It wasn't long ago that I would've greeted the sight of you there with sarcasm and gotten your rage in return," said Lawrence.

Holo also needed to feel useful, but unlike Col, she did not show it outwardly. She did such a good job of disguising this, in fact, that Lawrence sometimes forgot it was true.

"... Seems you've managed to learn something, then."

"Even I learn eventually."

"Heh. Still, if we resort to staying here long enough, our food supplies become a concern. That will be a bit of a bother." Popping the final morsel into her mouth, Holo sat up.

"Mm, yes, true. And if the snow piles up too much, we could well end up trapped in here. I agree with you that if we're to be trapped, I'd rather have it be in a town."

"There's that, but I've another reason."

"Another?"

"Aye. You might well find yourself buried alive under the wool left behind by the sheep I'd devour."

"That's an eventuality I'm keen to avoid."

Holo was not necessarily joking. Even seen from a distance, it was clear the flock's wool was very fine. No doubt its meat would be likewise.

"Yet with that lot outside stuck here as well, they'll have naught to do but trade rumors. As we're seeking information, that could be rather convenient for us."

"That's a double-edged sword. Rumors spread in the blink of an eye in a place like this. We need to find out about the wolf bones while drawing as little attention as possible, that's the problem."

Lawrence stroked his beard as he thought this over, and it did not take very long for him to consider what few possibilities there were.

It was very difficult to keep the mouths of others closed.

What they needed was someone in whom they could safely place their trust, and at the moment, there was only one person like that.

But Lawrence hesitated to fully trust Piasky.

There was no doubt he was an excellent individual—so much so that Lawrence did not want to have to stand beside him in front of Holo.

"'Twill be well. Just as a pack with two heads will often quarrel among itself, so too will its two leaders not become terribly close friends. 'Tis nothing to worry over."

Holo's words had cut so perfectly to the core of Lawrence's concern that it was almost frustrating. But even he found it difficult to admit that he was hesitant to ask Piasky's aid because he was worried about how well Piasky and Holo might get along.

And yet if he remained resolute in his pride, he would be playing right into the wolf's paws. And his lack of faith could even be construed as lack of faith in Holo.

So Lawrence bluffed as though the biggest business deal of his

life were riding on it. "After all we've been through, I'm not particularly concerned with whom you choose to be friends with," he declared.

Even Holo's ears should not be able to catch the lie, he reckoned.

And yet the moment he thought as much, Holo made a face as though she had just watched a rabbit hop into a snare. "Oh? Aren't you the leader of this pack?"

It took only a brief instant.

"You were keeping your guard up even as you got along with that other male, aye? Well, I suppose it's common for the new leader of a pack to try a bit too hard. I surely don't fail to understand your concerns..."

Lawrence thought back over Holo's words. She was a genius at obscuring the subject of her sentences. Worse, she understood all too well how others would interpret them.

"I thought as much, but—so 'tis true, then, that you were worried about such a thing? Not only do you count me the pack's leader, but you're hoping I won't give my favor to another?" Holo grinned. "Such an adorable pup."

She had gotten him again after all this time.

Lawrence did not so much as grunt.

The way she looked up at him with her chin in her hands was maddeningly cheeky. He wanted to grab her cheek, wrap her in a blanket, and toss her outside.

But if he lost his temper here, it would be like throwing oil on the fire of his shame. Like tossing money after a thief.

Lawrence reminded himself that gracefully accepting his defeat, while allowing a little frustration to show through, was the best response—the response most worthy of a merchant.

He heard the sound of rustling fabric; it was the sound of Holo turning over in her bed, annoyed by Lawrence's unexpectedly calm reaction.

"Hmph, look at you, playing at being such a reasonable male."

It was a terrible thing to say, but he could not rise to the bait.

"It's easy enough to do if I just think back to my childhood."

"Oh, aye?"

Lawrence held up his index finger and placed his other arm behind him at his waist, as though delivering a lecture. "When trying to attract the attention of the one you care for, what's the most charming method?"

Holo was dumbfounded.

"Why it's to harass her a little bit and make her notice you."

So don't get upset over every little thing. Lawrence walked over to the bed and poked Holo's nose with his index finger.

Naturally there were any number of comebacks she could have hurled at him. Lawrence was well aware of this, given how many times he had been sure he had her cornered only to have her turn the tables.

So he was fully prepared to have the finger he had thrust at her nose bitten, but for some reason, Holo seemed to find that fact itself amusing.

As Lawrence waited, wondering when she would counter-attack, she simply sat there looking up at him.

At length, with his finger still on her nose, she spoke in a slightly nasal tone. "There's no accounting for taste."

One did not always prefer what was objectively best. Piasky, for example.

Such was the signal of Holo's surrender. But her words had been chosen specifically to avoid flattering Lawrence.

"I-I'll take that as a compliment."

It was pathetic of him to stutter at such a crucial moment, though Her Wisewolfness seemed pleased.

"Hmph." Holo laughed through her nose.

Shortly thereafter, Col returned breathlessly to the room, carrying water with him.

While they were not particularly trying to obscure their identities, Lawrence and his companions only entered the sanctuary once the sun had begun to set.

Even with candles, the hour seemed somehow darker than true night.

As the snow continued to fall outside, the prospect of sitting in a pew and offering prayers of devotion had started to seem rather attractive.

The abbey's day was offset from the regular business day by about 25 percent, so the evening sermon was long since over, and the only ones in the sanctuary were Lawrence, his companions, and Piasky, along with a monk carrying a sheepskin satchel of very fine quality.

When he saw that Lawrence and the others had finished their prayers, he wordlessly approached them and opened his bag.

Piasky, Lawrence, and his two companions all dropped silver coins from across the sea into it.

"The blessings of God be upon you," said the monk gruffly and then quickly retreated.

No doubt he had candle lighting and nocturne to prepare for, but such treatment would hardly inspire average believers to come here on pilgrimage.

"Now, then, shall we?" murmured Piasky, and the words left his mouth in a puff of white vapor.

It was cold and well past the time to be enjoying wine, mutton, and merrymaking.

Unlike Lawrence, Piasky had many friends here, and it was his busiest time of day.

Lawrence nodded. Col was still silently praying, as was Holo; Lawrence nudged him, and they stood.

The sanctuary's high ceiling, from its entrance to the altar, gave the space a sense of grandeur, along with the august, divine majesty thanks to wealth accumulated over many years. If the embroidered curtain that hung down from the ceiling, faded by candle soot and cold winters alike, were pulled back, it felt very much that the past could be glimpsed as a golden, glittering land.

"Brondel Abbey...the house of our almighty God...," Col murmured, looking back after they'd passed the cloister and gone through a set of iron-barred, heavily fortified doors.

Though they would call Col a pagan, he did not seem to particularly hate the Church.

Perhaps he was struck by the majesty of this building that had been constructed here in the land of falling snow and had decided to let such small details slide, or perhaps he was simply fond of that verse.

Under normal circumstances Holo would have made sport of him, but she continued to hold his hand when he stopped and joined him in looking back. After a moment like that, they both followed after Lawrence.

"In truth, I would've liked to be able to invite you and your companions along as well, Mr. Lawrence..."

"Not at all. I understand entirely. Though if this were a business negotiation, I'd have a seat at the table even if I had to invite myself."

"Ha-ha-ha, I appreciate your saying so. I'll see you tomorrow, though."

"Indeed. Enjoy your wining!"

Lawrence and company took their leave of Piasky there in the torch-lit sanctuary and then proceeded to the shepherds' dormitories. At this late hour the streets were empty, even those around

the sanctuary, and the only light came from the lanterns beside each building's door.

"I'll just bet he'll have good wining, I will," said Holo.

They had not prayed within the sanctuary very long, but the footprints they had left on their way in had been buried under the falling snow.

"The wine in our wineskins is good enough," said Lawrence.

"Aye, but good wining means good food and good company as well."

"Just what are you getting at...?" Lawrence immediately assumed she was talking about him, but then realized otherwise. "Look, you—don't say anything like that at dinner, understand?"

Beneath her hood, Holo heaved a heavy sigh. Lawrence was certain that the *whump* sound of a foot stomping on snow was not his imagination.

"Just how is one meant to enjoy their drink around one so scruffy and gloomy? Not only would he not give me a proper greeting, just when I wondered where he'd gone, he returned with a basket full of raw mutton. Just what is he thinking, drying it above the hearth like that? Is he making sport of me?"

Shepherds departed early in the morning and returned only when the sun went down, so aside from dinner, most of their eating was done out of doors. To make matters worse, this was a place where snow was the norm. If the snow was too severe, a shepherd could be forced to find somewhere to stay at through the night. There certainly was no room in the dormitory for all the sheep. Preparing food for his comrades in the many stables here and there was part of his job.

Rather than being deliberately unsociable, Huskins's lack of grace was probably due to his being simply busy with preparations for the next day.

Of course, it was less that and more the fact that he had the

nerve to make mutton jerky right in front of her that bothered Holo so much. Worse, next to the string of jerky were links of mutton sausage.

"If it's jerky you want, there should still be some in the bag."

"That tough stuff suits my taste not," said Holo, turning away in displeasure.

It was enough to make Lawrence laugh. She was like an unreasonable child. But he knew he needed to be prepared for when she decided to truly press him. She had only given him trouble because the meat had been right before her eyes.

"If we do as Piasky did and put it in stew, it'll turn nice and tender," said Lawrence, which Holo looked up at, her lips curled in a derisive sneer.

"Why don't you just use the stewpot for a pillow from now on, hmm?"

Lawrence replied with a sigh. "Are you saying it'll soften my head?"

Holo faced forward and did not deign to reply.

Such was their conversation as they returned to the dormitory, the sounds of laughter and the scents of delicious food emanating from the rooms they passed. Holo was not the only one licking her lips at the smell of mutton.

The rickety doors of each building would be easily broken with a kick. Holo peered through each one as they passed, trying to catch a glimpse of what was being eaten within.

There were five rooms in the dormitory, with Lawrence and his companions occupying one of two rooms on the second floor.

In total, fifteen shepherds were housed there, and there was even a kennel dedicated for the sheepdogs. Counting the barns that dotted the surrounding countryside, Lawrence guessed there were around thirty shepherds in total. Not all of them

would know each other, as they alternated sleeping out in the barns and here in the dormitory.

Of them, Huskins was the oldest, and he supposedly knew more about sheep than God.

"We've returned."

It was not uncommon for travelers to rent rooms in the others' homes while journeying. A good way to ensure a pleasant time for all was to greet the home's occupants warmly.

"It's a magnificent sanctuary you have here."

Huskins gave only a minute nod, silently trimming tendons and fat from raw meat. Holo's look of pleasure was no doubt thanks to his removal of the fat, her favorite part.

Once Lawrence had seen Holo and Col back to the room, he immediately set about preparing for dinner. They were only allowed to stay there on the condition that they look after Huskins's meals.

Just as Lawrence picked up a stewpot, Huskins suddenly spoke.

"...A fitting place for God to live."

Understanding that this was in reference to the sanctuary, Lawrence smiled and nodded.

Lawrence borrowed some tools from Huskins to make a support for the pot, and then filled it with water, along with the ingredients in the proportions he had learned from Piasky.

He knew Holo liked a slightly stronger flavor, so he put in a little extra salt. Likewise he had heard that shepherds, like their sheep, preferred their food salty. He added some of the tough jerky, along with the bread that had been reduced to crumbs in its bag, making what would be a very nutritious meal.

Normally this would have been a good opportunity for some idle conversation, but Huskins was as quiet as ever as he continued his work. It was often said that those who spent their years

with animals would soon become unable to speak with anyone else, and Lawrence could understand why someone would say so.

"Dinner's on."

Lawrence went over to the next room to call Holo and Col in, whereupon he saw that they had pulled a few pieces of straw out of the bed and were playing a childish guessing game with them, trying to guess the shortest one.

Given the smile on his face, it seemed likely that Col was winning.

Lawrence patted Holo's head as he walked by them, and she very distinctly leaned toward him flirtatiously.

She didn't seem to be in very good spirits.

"Thanks be to God for this meal."

As befit an abbey, they recited the traditional prayer—something they did not normally do.

With a smile on his face, Col started eating immediately, but Holo's expression was a sour one, as though she really were a nun.

This was partially because the stew had only jerky for meat, but also because her distilled grape wine did not taste good with the hot broth.

Travel notwithstanding, now that they had reached their destination, Lawrence did not mind if she got drunk. He was sure he would hear her complaints on the subject, except that before them sat Huskins, like some sort of hermit.

In order to keep up appearances, Lawrence had decided it was best for them to appear to be pious pilgrims.

Their only acquaintance here was Piasky, and with the Ruvik Alliance lingering in the area, it was doubtful how much weight the Rowen Trade Guild's name would carry.

It would be best to seize the opportunity that staying with Huskins provided, given that although he was merely a shepherd, he had still lived in the abbey for a very long time. Like a jug filled

with water, a taciturn person's mind was filled with knowledge. The problem was figuring out how to remove the lid.

Huskins continued to eat his meal, silent, offering neither comments nor thanks.

Given that the dinner was a contractually obligated one, expressing any criticism would likely lead to a conflict, so his silence was undoubtedly the correct approach.

Unfortunately, this also meant that Lawrence had no opportunity to begin to pry the lid off. He would have to wait for a chance to present itself.

Lawrence thought it over as he continued to eat, and finally Huskins stood.

The contents of the pot were nearly gone—all that was left was to divvy up the remaining thick broth.

Holo grinned openly at the prospect of having one less person to have to share with, but her grin disappeared as he sat back down.

Huskins casually took a piece of jerky that had been drying on a strap and dropped it into the pot.

"...It's nice, eating with a group for once."

His voice was like a burned-out log collapsing in a campfire, but to Lawrence and his companions, each of whom had often eaten alone, it was a warm and friendly greeting.

Holo's mood immediately improved, and she was already eating some of the meat, which had not yet had a chance to properly boil.

Just as Lawrence was going to thank Huskins, he saw the old man offering him a small bottle.

As far as he could tell from the whitish substance around the lid, it seemed to be some sort of liquor made from sheep's milk.

Lawrence finished the wine in his own cup, then gratefully allowed Huskins to pour him some of the proffered drink.

"There's a taste I've not had in some time." It was a flavor one either loved or hated, and for his part Lawrence was none too fond of it.

And yet he understood that this was a gesture of friendship from Huskins, made in spite of their short stay.

Lawrence made a great show of savoring the stuff, such that Holo was surely laughing inwardly at him.

"So, Mr. Huskins..." Lawrence pretended at being prompted to speak out of drunkenness and stopped short to take in Huskins's reaction.

Huskins was cutting a piece of the boiled meat with a knife, which he put in his mouth and chased down with a drink of the milk liquor before looking at Lawrence.

"...You've been here long, have you?"

"...A few dozen years now. Since the time of the abbot before last."

"I see. I've been traveling since I was a boy, doing business all the while. I can barely imagine what it must be like to have spent so much time in one place."

Huskins said nothing, and sensing that he was still listening, Lawrence continued.

"Incidentally, I've heard there are three things that never change in the Winfiel kingdom. What about you, Mr. Huskins—would you say that's true?"

At these words, Huskins's knife froze in midslice in his bowl. His eyes looked far into the distance, as anyone's did when they were searching their memories.

"...The arrogant nobles, the beautiful plains..."

"And the flocks of sheep!"

As Lawrence finished the sentence, a faint smile flashed across Huskins's face.

"...It doesn't change much, this land."

"It sounds lovely."

"...You think so?" Huskins's voice was quiet but clear, as though he had seen through all of Lawrence's flattery.

Lawrence could feel Holo look up at him from under her hood, a bit of meat in her mouth.

His words were clear enough.

But Lawrence neither panicked nor cowered. He was a merchant and had no small amount of experience himself. "I use the same words any time I return somewhere after a year of travel and business." Lawrence smiled and continued, "Things never change."

"..."

From beneath the long, gray eyebrows, those animal yet human eyes focused on Lawrence. The powerful gaze felt somehow like Huskins was looking at him good and hard for the very first time.

The old shepherd then brought the cup of sheep's milk to his lips and nodded. "This place doesn't change, either. Reckon it'll stay that way, too."

"No doubt. This is Brondel Abbey after all."

Huskins nodded; then after nodding, he wordlessly poured Lawrence some more liquor.

Lawrence got the feeling Huskins had taken a liking to him. He could not stop himself from wishing that the wine were actually tasty.

"Thought not even a stone wall can resist the changes of the passing days," said Lawrence.

"...You mean those merchants? Are you lot any different?" This sarcastic manner of asking was particular to the region.

Lawrence swallowed more liquor and smiled, chagrined. "I am indeed a merchant, but my aim is a bit different from the others flocking here."

"...Oh ho. Coming all the way out here and bringing God's little lambs with you..."

"I'm here on pilgrimage to inquire about a holy relic here at the abbey."

Lawrence did not mention the wolf bones.

An abbey as large as Brondel would certainly have a few holy relics, and many pilgrims would surely come to view them.

Huskins appeared momentarily surprised but soon seemed to accept the story. He worked his mouth as though murmuring something and then nodded. "...There are many reasons to travel. Such brings color to a drab world."

Coming from the mouth of a minstrel, such words would have been mere affectation, but from Huskins they had the ring of truth.

Lawrence smiled and nodded, giving Huskins the greater portion of what delicious, savory broth remained in the bowl.

The next morning, Huskins left before dawn broke.

Through the window, the energetic barking of the sheepdogs could be heard as could chattering human voices, which suggested he always left around this hour.

Lawrence shivered at the frigid air that crept in under the blanket and clung to Holo's tail—she was under the same blanket—trying to hold on to the happiness of warmth just a bit longer.

When he next awoke, a good amount of time had passed. The sun was already well in the sky, and several rays slipped through the cracks in the window.

No sooner had he mused upon how complacent he had grown, having done no business in a while, than he realized what it was that let him sleep so soundly.

It was very warm under the covers—and Holo had slept in the same bed all night.

"I surely am handy to have about."

And surely it was pleasant to awaken to a beautiful maiden sleeping upon one's chest—though not perhaps when her mouth was full of jerky.

And not when her breath stank of liquor.

No doubt she had wanted to avoid being scolded, and furthermore, she hated the notion of hunching over next to the fireplace to drink alone. Even Lawrence avoided drinking alone—and it was warmer under the blankets, as well.

"...Where's Col?"

"I know not...He tended the hearth for a while, but once the sun rose he went off with the shepherds and their staves."

A shred of jerky hanging from her mouth shook as she spoke, and from its color, Lawrence was sure it was part of the meat Huskins had been drying the previous day.

But criticizing her would be more trouble that it was worth. He would simply have to hope that Huskins didn't notice.

"So it's sunny outside, eh...?"

The winter often kept people shut up indoors for one reason or another.

If it was fine out, there would be more people out, with the blooms of their conversation more lively.

"Aye. Just a moment ago the dogs were scampering about. And it seems as though a certain someone seems to be thinking me one of them."

"Better than drinking wine first thing in the morning. Come, move aside. I've got to go out and see what's afoot."

He nudged Holo's shoulder, but she seemed completely disinclined to move. He heaved a heavy sigh and crawled out of the bed.

While the sun had been up for some time, cold was cold.

He wanted to return to the bed where Holo continued to gnaw

on her jerky, but such was the devil's temptation. Lawrence opened the window wide.

That moment the sunlight reflecting off the snow stabbed into his eyes, rendering his vision temporarily ineffective.

"... Whew. Still, what a sight."

"'Tis cold."

"It might not be the same as when you looked out over the ocean, but the view does make me want to run about a bit. Look, even Col is over there playing with the sheepdogs."

The barn was just beyond and downhill from the well, and beside it was none other than Col, around whom four sheepdogs jumped and frolicked.

Lawrence then realized his error with an "ah." Holo could hardly play with the sheepdogs the way Col could.

He laughed soundlessly at this, which earned him a suspicious glare from Holo.

"He'll return soon enough, with lips white from cold. You can tease him all you like then."

"..."

She did not seem interested, but her wagging tail suggested she did not find the idea altogether displeasing.

When he went into the next room, he found that there was still charcoal in the hearth and then understood that Col had made it ready before going out. It went without saying that he had also fetched water.

As Lawrence poured the water over the crusty rye bread, he looked at the meat that had dried overnight; it was darker in color now. Stroking his beard, he decided there was no harm in putting the question to Holo.

"Want to come along?"

He was referring, of course, to gathering information about the wolf bones that they were pursuing at Holo's request.

But Holo only flopped over on the bed, her tail swishing lazily to and fro.

"Enjoy your rest," Lawrence said and closed the door.

He wondered, though, if the slight waver in his voice had given him away.

The area was full of merchants working with the Ruvik Alliance. In the process of searching for talk of the wolf bones, he would surely come across all sorts of other news.

He went outside, where the sun's reflection off the snow made it brighter than the brightest summer day. Hiding his confident smile behind both hands, he began to walk.

"Assaj vermilion, arol woad, vud oak, rocatta saffron."

"*Rocatta saffron* is fine indeed. I hear the Duke of Milone donned magnificent yellow robes at a banquet recently."

"You mean the banquet that terrified even the Bishop of Mirah? Thanks to that, one of the noblemen who's a regular of mine went on an ordering tear, and I wound up turning a serious profit."

"Oh? Must be nice. If you're looking for spices, I'll have some coming in on the next boat. What do you say? They're from all over..."

If all he had to go by were the conversations he could overhear from across the street, Lawrence would have wondered just where he was.

Given that merchants' friends were also merchants, it was probably possible to buy any good from anywhere in the world just by following the connections of the merchants in this town. With such promise before him, how could Lawrence's heart fail to beat faster in his chest?

Unlike them, he was a mere traveling merchant, and while he could not match them for knowledge of well-known, high-priced goods, when it came to the obscure specialties of small villages, he would not be outdone.

Perhaps he should go join that circle there? No, no—maybe this one here. Temptation assailed him.

But Lawrence finally swallowed this all down and arrived at a building.

Above its entrance hung a green banner with a moon and a shield on it, identifying it as an inn used by the Ruvik Alliance.

"You needn't knock," said one of a group of merchants, who were having an energetic conversation about blacksmiths.

Lawrence smiled faintly, at which not just the merchant who had spoken up, but the entire group tipped their hats and acknowledged him with a bow.

This place is a merchants' paradise, Lawrence thought to himself and then pushed the door open.

"Excuse me—does Mr. Piasky happen to be in?"

"Hmm... Piasky? Oh, you mean Lag. He's in the back, writing—that fellow there."

"My thanks." Lawrence nodded to the man, then headed for the corner of the room, the like of which could be found on the first floor of any trading house or inn for relaxation and recreation.

There were about twenty round tables in the room, around which merchants played cards, discussed maps, and weighed coins on scales.

Among them was Piasky, who was furiously writing something.

Lawrence hesitated to disturb him, but the veteran traveling merchant was perceptive enough to spot mercenaries two hilltops away.

He looked up and fixed his gaze on Lawrence and then immediately smiled.

"Good morning, Mr. Lawrence. Did you sleep well last night?"

"I did, thank you. Though I doubt I will enjoy the same experience tonight."

"Oh? Why is that?" Piasky's voice rose in a carefully interrogative tone, playing along with Lawrence's leading statement.

What an amiable young man, Lawrence thought to himself before pointed up at his own eyes. "I believe this is the first time I've seen a traveling merchant wearing spectacles. I'm so jealous I may lose sleep over it."

"Oh, these? Ha-ha-ha! Well, we're in an abbey, the home of writing, after all. You can find cast-off spectacles quite easily here. These don't belong to me, naturally."

It was hard enough to make transparent glass, but a master craftsman could grind and polish it into a lens.

While glasses were expensive and rare, they were practically a necessity for the monks who had to transcribe finely ornamented letters with only candlelight to work by.

"So, what news, then? Oh, do please sit down."

Lawrence noticed a slate on the table, upon which the names and quantities of a variety of goods were written in chalk. Piasky seemed to be making a list of goods to bring here on his next visit.

"A single merchant can keep a list of goods to trade in his head, but when you join an organization, you need proof of your orders."

"So figures over memories. Still, in a company like that, your name won't just be recorded in the Church's burial register—you'll live on in the memories of your comrades."

"Quite so, quite so, God willing." Piasky smiled and continued writing, dipping his quill in an ink pot. "You'll have to excuse my writing. I assume you're here to inquire about our merry progress?"

"...Is it all right to be talking about it so openly?"

"Ha-ha-ha, yes, it's fine. I know everyone here. Outsiders are always carefully observed."

Still smiling, Lawrence was not so foolish as to try looking around.

And likewise still smiling, Piasky directed a startlingly keen gaze at Lawrence. "Indeed, Deutchmann's trust in you bought you a ticket in here, so worry not. For my part, in return for furnishing you information, I'm tempted to ask how exactly you earned that trust... but I suppose that's a trade secret."

Piasky's smile was full of mischief.

Lawrence was careful not to let his guard down, but his own smile was a natural one. "Unfortunately, yes."

"I quite understand. So, about the circumstances here, it feels as though we're grinding our teeth before the walls of a fortress that should fall soon. But our jaw is getting tired, so we're taking a bit of a break."

"... They've been able to endure, despite all being pressed by such numbers?"

"We've tried to engage in standard negotiations any number of times. But never to any avail, so now I hear we're trying to reach the head abbot, assistant head abbot, another head abbot of a sister abbey who was once powerful here, and even going all the way down to the head archivist, trying to win someone, anyone over. With this many merchants, surely one of them knows someone who's close to one of them. And yet they've flatly rejected everything. The head abbot must be in a terrible position, and yet... it's rather impressive."

Rather than speaking derisively, Piasky sounded genuinely impressed.

No doubt from the perspective of someone within the organization, the fact that the abbey had continued to weather the Ruvik Alliance's assault was nigh miraculous.

"So... Mr. Lawrence, just what is it you've come to ask me?" He smiled pleasantly.

Lawrence was a veteran of many exchanges with Holo, who was a genius at tricking people into revealing the truth. He was perfectly capable of dealing with this sort of attack.

In the end, he did not play dumb, instead glancing away momentarily. Boasting now wouldn't accomplish anything, he decided, since this inn was flying the banner of the Ruvik Alliance.

Even if he were able to manipulate Piasky, it was much more likely he would be seen as a cheeky upstart rather than a canny merchant.

"Actually, it's a bit embarrassing to say out in the open like this."

"Most of the talk being exchanged here in these abbey grounds is too embarrassing to be heard. Please, speak your mind." He was like a priest hearing a confession.

"You truly think so?"

"Quite. I'm also personally rather interested. I don't have the sense you've come just to witness this sad state of affairs. I'd assume you're here to meet someone, but then you sought out me, not a monk. I'm a merchant, and so I can't help being as curious as a cat. When the curtain stirs, I want to peek behind it."

Lawrence had met very few people who he thought it would be amusing to do business with. He suddenly wished their back-and-forth could continue forever, but this was the moment to strike and triumph.

He felt a twinge of regret as he faked a smile and spoke. "I was hoping we'd be able to view the holy relics."

Piasky's expression instantly changed. He stroked his face as though trying to recover from a mistake. "Apologies. Ah... excuse me. I suppose I still have much to learn. I surely didn't expect that to be your answer."

"Do you not doubt me?"

"Please don't tease me. This is a branch of the great Brondel Abbey. If I were to be more surprised at the notion of you coming to view holy relics than I would be at you coming for profit, I'd only invite the anger of God." Piasky smiled, looked at the tip of his quill pen, and seemed to notice that the ink had nearly dried. He dipped it again in the ink pot and continued his writing. "I truly imagined you'd come for another reason."

"Other reason?"

"Yes. Ah, but now I understand. It makes sense. You don't let your guard down easily, Mr. Lawrence. For you to have gone to the trouble of visiting Mr. Deutchmann first before coming here, your aim is having a look at the asset records we completed?"

This was what Lawrence had discussed with Holo at the port inn.

If the Ruvik Alliance had come to acquire the abbey's landholdings, he was sure they would have done a thorough investigation of the abbey's assets.

True, it was something he had concluded in hindsight, but there was no need to humiliate himself by admitting as much. So Lawrence neither shook his head nor nodded it, merely smiling.

"Given how famous the abbey is, it seemed likely to have many holy relics. Naturally we haven't recorded them all, but... what sort of thing are you searching for? I may be able to help you."

And here was the crux. Lawrence decided to hedge his bets with his answer. "Something connected to the golden sheep."

"The golden sheep..."

When a clever merchant repeated words that had just been spoken to him, it was practically certain he was thinking things over. In the time it took to repeat those words, he might consider a hundred different things.

But even having bought a bit of time, Piasky said nothing

further. Instead, he showed the same sort of smile that Col had whenever Holo teased him.

No doubt the surrounding merchants that were listening in were now inwardly disappointed at his performance.

"As far as relics passed down from saints go, I know something about several such items, but if it's the golden sheep..."

"So, it's nonsense, you're saying."

"Well, I couldn't be so certain," said Piasky, glancing at the merchants one table over.

The two of them seemed to be playing cards. Their ears pricked up, but they only shrugged in response.

"The tale of the golden sheep's circulated through the abbey for centuries. Or in other words..."

"...That shows that in all those centuries, it's never been found."

"More or less, yes," said Piasky. His expression was full of regret, probably because he was trying to avoid looking simply shocked that Lawrence would go to such lengths on a fool's errand.

There was no need for Lawrence to bother trying to preserve his dignity now, but if his reputation suffered too badly here, it could become a hindrance to further information gathering.

There was a very fine line between being humble and being looked down upon—and to that end, Lawrence needed to make a course correction.

"Truthfully, before I came here, I was told by many people it was a foolish notion. But it seems people like me aren't the only ones who get the notion to chase after their dreams—those who spend their days staring at ledgers sometimes feel likewise. Which is how I came to be introduced to Mr. Deutchmann."

"...Meaning?"

"The person who introduced me to Mr. Deutchmann must

have seen what I was chasing and thought it interesting. He couldn't very well chase such a tale himself, so he sent me on in his place. The more established one is, the more generous one can be to eccentrics."

The best way to confidently lie was to use truth as a base and leave plenty of room for interpretation.

The pair of men playing cards behind Piasky nodded, as though believing the tale.

While it might be seen as unreasonable to abandon chasing a living in exchange for chasing a mad dream, it was not so very rare among wealthy men.

"So that's how it is," said Piasky quietly.

"Ah, you're thinking you've learned another way to ingratiate yourself to the rich."

"No, in my case, I'm quite serious." Piasky's self-conscious smile was strangely reassuring.

Lawrence did not want his reputation to either fall too low or soar too high. With this, he was confident he had established himself as a harmless merchant who had simply come to the town with a slightly odd goal.

Thus he felt emboldened to take a step forward.

"So this is why I'd like to learn as much as possible about the golden sheep. Is there anyone in the area who would know more?"

Any merchant who ignored the whims of a rich man was no merchant at all.

The surrounding traders who had been listening in all gathered round, smiling secretly into their wine cups.

Lawrence asked not after the wolf bones but instead the golden sheep, as he knew that wolves and sheep were always companions.

If there existed a relic that related to the golden sheep, it would

lead him to more knowledge about the wolf bones. At the very least, he would be able to catch their scent.

Or so he had thought, but ultimately he learned less than he expected to.

Worse, as befitted the sort of talk that happened with wine in one hand, when he finally returned to the inn room in the evening, his footing was rather unsteady.

Holo was sitting on the bed, grooming her tail, and before she could move out of the way, Lawrence collapsed onto it.

She wriggled out from under his arm as Col hurried to bring water.

"Well, you're in a fine state," Holo said as she finally extracted herself, prompting Lawrence to muse that she was the last person who should be saying as much.

He took the bowl of water that Col offered him and drank, still lying on his side. If he had not mastered such tricks, he never would have been able to get by in cheap, crowded inn rooms.

After drinking the bowl dry, he gave it back to Col.

If he closed his eyes now, he would fall asleep on the spot.

"So, how much were you able to learn?" Holo glared at Lawrence with narrowed eyes, pulling on his ear as she asked.

Had he been sober, he would have gotten angry, but given that he was currently using Holo's fluffy, warm tail as a pillow, her anger was entirely understandable as well.

"Surely you can tell whether or not I enjoyed my wine... can't you?"

"Aye. If you'd claimed to enjoy your drinking, I'd have bitten your ears off."

"Had I known it would end this way, I would've brought you along... sadly, my lady the wisewolf had already taken to her drink."

His wine-soaked mind could no longer exercise any sort of

restraint. He spoke sarcastically in spite of himself, earning a slap to the face from Holo.

Honestly, it would have only made it harder to gather information had Holo been with him, and Holo was well aware of that, which was why she had not ventured to go along.

Holo's hand made a sharp smack when it hit Lawrence's cheek, after which she lightly pinched it. "Anything else you'd like to say, hmm?"

The stimulation was pleasant on his numbed face, and he closed his eyes and answered, "Just let me sleep."

"Fool. Still, unlike you, I'm one who knows how to show her gratitude."

Despite his rapidly fading consciousness, he could perceive the sensation of his cheek being stroked.

His very next memory was of opening his eyes not to the dim of twilight, but to the pitch-black of already fallen night.

He was unable to sit up in bed with any kind of speed. He was quite sure that he had fallen asleep in the precise position he had occupied when Holo stroked his cheek.

He did not have to move his head to know it was aching.

Closing his eyes briefly and regretting not at least assuming a more comfortable position before falling asleep, he slowly sat up.

His body felt like dry soil, and he was stiff and sore all over. The only saving grace was that he was still covered by a blanket.

No, not a blanket, he realized.

Having sat up, he noticed dark brown animal fur clinging to his clothing. Had Holo covered him with her tail the entire time? He brushed the fur free, and Holo's sweet scent reached his nose.

"Ow—"

He straightened up, hand on his sleep-kinked neck. A faint stream of light made its way through the cracks in the room's

door, which slowly opened. Thanks to the liquor, even the light from the hearth hurt his eyes.

"You're awake, are you?"

"...I think so."

"Dinner's still hot. Will you take some?"

"...Water."

In place of a reply, Holo only shrugged and then fetched a pitcher.

"Where's Col?"

"At the moment, he's hearing a lecture from that shepherd on how to deal with snow. Our lad Col is quite the listener." Faintly illuminated by the light through the door, Holo's bold smile was rather terrifying. Col was such a good listener that he made it all too easy to prattle on proudly about all sorts of things, which seemed to be sitting even worse with Holo than Lawrence would have guessed.

She stood next to Lawrence, refusing to sit as she looked down at him, which corroborated his conclusion.

"I suppose I'll have to ask someone to teach me the rules that apply when you're angry with me."

"Someone other than me?"

"You when you're *not* angry. You're a different person when you lose your temper."

"Mm. This is only a temporary form, after all," said the fierce wisewolf with a kind smile. "So, what of your results?"

They both knew perfectly well that the door was a thin one, so the conversation was low and whispered into the ear. It was not far from pillow talk, and Lawrence could not help but smile at the notion, still not quite free of the wine's influence.

But the first reason for his smile was this: Even though Holo desperately wanted to know the results of his investigation, she

had been considerate enough not to immediately grab him by the lapels and demand answers on the spot when he had come wobbling back.

Lawrence's smile slowly shifted to a conciliatory one—if she was asking about results, he could only admit those had been meager.

"I heard nothing that will lead us to the truth."

Holo's expression shifted.

Lawrence wondered if she didn't lose her temper because she knew that merchants were creatures who did not simply stay down when knocked over or because she had anticipated this outcome.

"...So?"

At Holo's question, Lawrence's mouth gave her its merchant's answer. "As long as it's not a private operation, there will definitely be records of purchases and assets. If what we're looking for is here, there ought to be traces of it."

Piasky's writing in the commons was a good sign. Even if it was an item that needed to be hidden, it had to have been noted in writing somewhere. The merchants' habit of writing everything down was what had led to the reversal of fortunes in Kerube.

"Hmm..." Holo sniffed her assent with a hand on her hip, looking hard at Lawrence. The moment he broke his gaze and looked down, the fur of her tail puffed up. "Did you think your misdirection would work on me?"

Even if he had been sober, Lawrence doubted he could have withstood the low, cold tone of her voice. He slowly raised both hands in surrender, trying to shift the blame of his glib merchant's answer to the wine.

"I admit it. Until we can prove the bones don't exist, I could simply pretend to be searching for them."

And proving a negative was essentially impossible.

With her great beast ears, Holo listened, closing her eyes to hear all the more keenly.

There was something Lawrence had to say to her.

"I'm sorry... for making you endure this."

In that moment, Holo's shoulders froze in surprise. She looked like a child who had been caught doing something bad, and at the sight of this, Lawrence was so taken aback he ended up smiling.

"As a mere traveling merchant, all I can do is try to gather information in this roundabout manner. But you could—"

She could surely prove even the existence of the devil.

Wine had a way of loosening one's inhibitions.

Normally Lawrence would have spoken more prudently, but his feverish head was letting his mouth run free.

Had Holo not covered that mouth with both hands, he most definitely would have continued to speak.

"..."

He had opened a box that should never have been opened, Holo's expression said as her hands remained over his lips.

But there was not much force behind those hands.

Lawrence was still for a moment, but as Holo still had not said anything, he took her hands and slowly removed them.

"You learned as much from Kerube, didn't you? If I thought to try to forcibly take something as valuable as a holy relic, that's how it would turn out. It would be bad for me, but it would be just as bad for you."

Holo's hands were small, her fingers slender.

Given the great size of her true wolf form, this had to be a very inconvenient shape for her.

With those huge claws and fangs, she could easily take by force nearly anything she desired.

"You said it yourself back in Kerube. Your claws and fangs could set things right in an instant."

The high walls of the abbey, its sturdy gates with heavy chains locked with an elaborately constructed lock—all of it would be smashed, their contents laid bare.

The abbey guards would pose no trouble at all. They had the authority to protect the abbey, but that meant nothing to Holo. She could scour the abbey and achieve her goal in the blink of an eye.

But the reason she did not do so was obvious.

"I can..." Holo opened her mouth. "If you wish to go far away, I can take you there on my back. If you desire something, I can hunt it down for you and bring it to you. If enemies attack you, I'll drive them away, and if there's something you wish to protect, I can come to your aid. But..."

She continued to hold onto Lawrence's right hand, but she gently released it, then grasped it again with her own small hands.

"The only time I can do anything for you is when you're in your human form."

When Lawrence was in trouble, she could help him, but when she herself was in trouble, it would be faster for her to solve the problem on her own.

At first glance, this would seem to be an advantageous situation for Lawrence, but both Lawrence and Holo knew the truth. The relationship of a hen and her chick only worked if the hen was the hen and the chick the chick.

Now that they had a grasp of the whereabouts of Yoitsu, if Holo seized the wolf bones by her own power, Lawrence would have no further part to play.

Holo could solve everything on her own. Furthermore, doing so would be much more effective. Now that it had come to that, she was surely worrying about whether Lawrence would remain by her side.

Lawrence could not simply laugh it off and tell her she was worrying too much. A good business relationship only functioned

when both parties benefited, and through her centuries spent in Pasloe, Holo had already experienced the breakdown that came when a relationship ceased to be mutually beneficial.

He pulled his right hand—which Holo had grasped—back toward himself and then put his left arm around her lower back. As he was still sitting, this put his face right up to her chest.

It was far from the case that he was not at all shy about this; it was in fact his shyness that propelled him.

Holo seemed a bit surprised, but evidently understood his intent and relaxed her body. She then placed her other hand on his head.

"I'm sorry. Just be patient a little longer, will you?"

Lawrence was in the wrong. He had to show her as much.

"...Mm." Holo nodded slightly, the total opposite of her normal demeanor.

Her hand lay on his head as though she were a priest hearing the confession of a believer and forgiving his weakness. But somehow it seemed as though Holo was the one apologizing.

"Don't apologize. If you do, all my effort will have been for nothing."

Holo's modest chest was not exactly something one could bury one's face in, but perhaps that was for the best, he mused, once he had worked up the nerve to look at her.

Lawrence looked up and smiled, and Holo angrily pinched his cheek.

No doubt she was telling him not to underestimate her, although she certainly knew he had deliberately said that to make her angry.

After continuing to hold on to his cheeks for a while, she finally relaxed both her body and her expression and smiled a tired smile. "If we find they are indeed the bones of my pack mate, my patience may well be at an end."

"And that is fine. I'll have an important job once you've bared your fangs and run off."

It was easy for him to imagine Holo's frozen form as she stared at the bones of her comrade.

"You're certainly a confident one."

"As you're so fond of saying, I'm a foolish male."

Whenever Holo was truly happy, she would tuck her head down and smile almost ticklishly. That was all the motivation Lawrence needed to resolve to determine the truth of the wolf bones.

"Heh. If we speak like this too long, we may be suspected of mischief."

Lawrence wondered if it would be too crude to ask what sort of mischief she meant. As he was mulling it over, Holo suddenly pulled away from him. But then she only smiled her malicious smile, as though having seen right through him.

There was no point in trying to keep up with her.

He evinced a chagrined smile, and Holo replied with a grin wide enough to bare her fangs. "I'll bet dinner is still warm."

Lawrence conceded and stood. "I could use a drink."

"Aye, and help yourself," came Holo's enjoyably teasing reply.

Upon opening the thin wooden door, Lawrence counted himself lucky to see Col still listening earnestly to Huskins's lecturing.

CHAPTER THREE



A bit of wine still remained in Lawrence's head, and he rolled it to and fro experimentally to make sure it wouldn't fall off.

Feeling as though he would be a pathetic merchant indeed to be affected by liquor the next day, Lawrence lightly slapped his cheeks and told himself it was because of his shortage of sleep.

In any case, he had woken up and had not even as much time for early-morning dazedness as it would take for the flickering charcoal fire to brighten.

On top of that, this was neither an inn next to a busy town marketplace nor a mountain hut without a soul around. A certain amount of sound was audible from outside—the voices of humans and dogs and sheep—but they merely emphasized the room's quietness and made an excellent lullaby.

The crackling firewood and the crumbling ashes were even better.

Lawrence yawned hugely and looked up with bleary eyes and saw that the drying meat there had hardened and darkened, and above a string of onions and garlic, he could see preserving yeast.

One could live without much coin after all. This room was a model for such a life.

Lawrence stirred up the fire in the hearth, yawning again.

"Good morning," said Col, not yawning even a single time in the process.

The boy's threadbare clothes and tousled hair were the very image of poverty, and his slender wrists and ankles belied the many dinners he had missed.

But his bright, clever eyes made it clear he was no beggar, but a wandering student. That strong, clear gaze was the single attribute that forever separated him from any pauper.

"It's cold again today, isn't it?"

"If it were truly cold, it would be nigh impossible to get out of bed."

"Then I suppose it's just cold enough to manage."

There was a strange sense of camaraderie between those who relied on Holo's tail for warmth. Since the first thing they did upon rising and gathering around the fire was to brush her fur off of themselves, it was only natural that a certain affinity would bloom.

"Is Holo still sleeping, then?"

"She was curled up into a ball, so I don't think she'll wake for a time."

Lawrence only chuckled at this, then gave Col some bread and jerky and ate some himself.

"Once the morning church bells ring, we'll go visit the alliance's inn."

"Er... shall I wake up Miss Holo, then?" Col looked thoughtfully out the window, no doubt calculating the angle of light with the calendar day to estimate the hour.

"No, no need. If she isn't already up by then, we'll leave her be."

"... Might she not be angry?"

While his words were chosen and pronounced well, proof of his good education, he ate his bread the way a dog or cat would.

He stuffed the entire piece in his mouth, not wasting a single crumb, and it was gone.

"She won't. If she turns truly serious about wanting to discover whether or not the bones are there, she'll find out right away."

"Huh? Er... you mean..."

Col was naturally aware of Holo's true form and power, so he would have long since realized that possibility. He probably refrained from mentioning it out of a sense of tact.

But after being momentarily taken aback by Lawrence's comment, the expression he showed and words he spoke next were far outside of Lawrence's expectations.

"She must trust us. We'll have to do our very best."

It was now Lawrence's turn to be taken aback.

"Uh—er?" Col said, Lawrence's surprise being enough to make him wonder if he had said something strange.

"Nothing," Lawrence said with a wave of his hand, wiping his own face roughly with his other hand, as though trying to re-form clay.

The boy was far outside the ordinary.

"I was just wondering if I was that clever when I was your age."

"Er... no, I didn't mean..."

"Or maybe I'm just a fool?" The thought came to him unbidden, but the plain fact was that naturally gifted people did exist in the world. The important thing was not to be envious of them, but to work harder so as not to lose out to them. "Ah, well, I've already shown you how pathetic I can be, so it's too late to worry about that."

Lawrence brushed bread crumbs off of himself and stood.

Things were as they were. What he had to work out was not how to change his circumstances, but how to conduct himself within them.

"Mr. Lawrence."

"Hmm?"

Col stood and took his coat in hand as he gave Lawrence a reproachful look. "I'm not at all confident that I'll ever be able to be like you, Mr. Lawrence."

This was probably the highest compliment a man of Lawrence's age could be paid, but the simple truth was that Lawrence was still too young to accept it.

"That'd be a problem if you were my apprentice." Lawrence tousled the boy's hair and continued, "But when traveling, there's no use in having two of the same kind of person. When you complement one another, though—that's the best sort of traveling companion to have."

It was the sort of line that would probably make Holo smile wryly beneath the covers, if she were awake. But Col's face lit up as though he had received holy scripture, and he nodded energetically.

"I'll do my best!"

"I'm counting on it," Lawrence said, and just then the sound of the morning bell came through the window.

The two faced the direction of the sound and, after listening intently, took action.

Lawrence could see why Holo was so fond of Col. Seeing that for himself had a calming effect, he could tell.

Outside it was so bright it hurt the eyes.

"The first thing is to get a look at the list of holy relics. If it's been accidentally listed there, then we'll be in luck."

"So I'll play a student on pilgrimage, then?"

"And if anyone asks, tell them of your interest in church management. Did you learn anything about that at school?"

Beneath the eaves of the deserted shepherds' dormitory, Lawrence put the question to Col as the boy wrapped his legs in cloth.

The wrappings served to keep his feet warm, despite his still wearing straw sandals.

"We weren't taught anything about money."

"I see. Perfect, then."

Col snuggled his wrappings up and looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. "I haven't learned a thing, so if you could teach me, sir—"

"An excellent performance." Lawrence patted Col's head and started to walk.

The sky was clear and bright, and the ground was coated in such silvery snow that it reflected the sunlight painfully back up.

Merchants who detoured over the snowy mountains in winter to win some advantage over their competition would emerge darkly tanned; Lawrence now understood why.

Col emerged just behind Lawrence and narrowed his eyes at the brightness. "I hope we can find what we're looking for on the lists."

"That's your job," said Lawrence, which stunned Col for a moment.

"Huh?!" he replied with exaggerated surprise.

"Your knowledge of the Church is far greater than mine. The patron saints of the shepherds, the saints that were once pagan gods, the strange superstitions that surround wolves and sheep. Only you can tell them from one another."

Col's charming manners were not the only thing about him that Holo liked. She also respected his steadfast will.

"... Understood." Despite his surprise, Col nodded solemnly.

Lawrence took on the tone of a teacher in response. "I'm counting on you." Then, thrusting his chest out, he pushed open the door of the Ruvik Alliance's inn.

"Hmm? Oh, welcome. It was a fine time we had last night."

Opening the door, there were already several merchants there,



idly conversing over their meal. One of them spoke up, jug in hand, as Lawrence opened the door.

He wondered if they had started drinking in the morning, but such activity wasn't uncommon when one was held up in an inn because of snow.

"Good morning. I just wanted to find Piasky and thank him for last night's feast."

"If you're looking for Lag, he's in the sanctuary. Part of a regular negotiation. He's quite a merchant for one so young."

Given the man's tone, it was clear that Piasky was no mere messenger. It was possible that once the Ruvik Alliance obtained the abbey's land, they planned to immigrate and establish a town or marketplace there. It seemed unlikely that someone with the unusual job of aiding settlers would be relegated to a mere courier.

"The sanctuary, you say? Thank you very much."

"Sure. Let's drink again sometime. Bring your master along this time, eh?"

The man was referring to the fictional "master" Lawrence had made up in the course of his information gathering.

It was a bit coarse of the man to say so, but if he was willing to lay his own motives so bare, Lawrence could reply without worry. In actuality, it was always worse to be suspected than to have one's plans fully known, since doubt and imagination could give rise to speculation that exceeded any reality.

"Shouldn't they be holding a prayer service at the sanctuary now?" Col asked as they put the inn behind them.

"I doubt the abbey is able to refuse. Their position seems weaker than I'd have guessed."

Illuminated by snow and sky, the church gleamed like a beautiful, polished gem. But the ones offering their prayers and praises

to God were not within the sanctuary but outside it, which proved just how much the Church's own authority was being trampled.

Outside the tightly shut doors was a group of devout merchants standing in prayer.

Just as Lawrence was wondering what to do, the sanctuary doors opened. There emerged a procession led by the high-ranking merchants and their attendants, followed by experienced-looking traders bearing parchments and sheaves of paper.

Piasky was at the head of that second group. He noticed Lawrence standing at the side of the road and stepped out of the procession to greet him.

"Good morning, Mr. Lawrence. Are you recovered from last night?"

"My companion's something of a drinker, so I got quite an earful."

"Ha-ha. Well, bring her along next time, eh?"

As they exchanged casual greetings, Lawrence briefly sized up Piasky's position. He did not seem to be in a particularly low position.

"Mr. Piasky, do you have a moment?"

At Lawrence's invitation, Piasky waved to his fellows and answered, "A bit, yes."

What surprised Lawrence was not the fact that Piasky was willing to spare him some time—rather it seemed from Piasky's words and bearing that he felt he was doing Lawrence a small favor.

If so, he would expect it to be returned.

Lawrence flashed his best merchant's smile. "My thanks. Where shall we go?"

"I've work to do, so perhaps the library?"

"The library?"

"Ah, apologies. It's that building there. There's a theology

scholar who acts as a sort of clerk on the first floor. Just give him my name." Piasky indicated a stone building nestled behind another building by the street.

Its windows had wooden shutters rather than glass, and it did not give the impression that it was heavily used.

"I have to make a report, so if you'll give me a bit of time..."

"Understood. I'll see you at the library."

After the two men made their excuses, Piasky headed off for the inn.

It wasn't very long before a familiar figure slowly came walking up to Lawrence and Col—it was Holo.

"I daresay I'll come along, as well," came her soft voice from beneath her hood.

The marks of sleep were still clear on her face, so Lawrence had to wonder if she had been debating whether or not to accompany him in her dreams.

Of course, neither Lawrence nor Col pointed that fact out. They simply nodded.

Half an hour later, they made for the building Piasky had indicated, where they were indeed met by a bearded, stern-faced man who seemed to be a Church scholar, and once he had heard Piasky's name, he led them into the library.

As one would expect from the term, it was filled with all sorts of things.

But strangely, most of the documents seemed as though they would have been of little use to merchants. There were maps, rough outlines of towns, lists of craft guilds, and even family trees of noble houses.

Piasky seemed to have been given an office here, to which Lawrence and his companions were led, passing through a deserted document room.

When the door to his office was opened, it looked much the same as the rest of the library.

"My apologies for interrupting you while you're so busy."

"Not at all. My comrades were so rude last night, after all—not that this is an apology."

Perhaps this explained why Piasky had seemed as though he was doing Lawrence a favor.

"Not at all. I learned all sorts of useful things, so I should be thanking you. Of course—" Lawrence continued jokingly, "that does make it harder for me to ask another favor of you."

Ledgers would always be adjusted so the balance came to zero.

However, it was also true that a small loss could become a huge gain.

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, if it's a difficult favor, I may have to ask for some compensation. What could it be, I wonder? If it's something I can easily arrange, just name it."

"Honestly, it's what you were speaking of last night. I was hoping you could arrange for me to have a look at the list of holy relics within Brondel Abbey."

"Oh, that? I was sure it would be something else. Well, I wasn't lying, here—look," said Piasky, picking up a stack of parchment from atop the stacks on his desk and handing it to Lawrence.

There upon it was indeed written a list of holy relics.

"I thought you might want to have a look at it, so I made it ready for you."

Lawrence flipped through a few pages, then looked up with gratitude. "My deepest thanks to you. If someone like me were to knock upon the doors of the abbey myself, I'm quite sure I'd be turned away at once."

"Not at all. I'm sure you've guessed as much, given how easily I handed it over to you, but there's nothing of use there. Nearly everything written on it is worthless. You'll smile to see it, I'm

sure," said Piasky, as though he were recommending a particularly tasty wine.

As Lawrence started to scan the parchment, he understood that Piasky was quite right. Even not knowing their exact market value, each entry in the long list of items was a famous relic that would have taken a truly unbelievable sum to purchase.

But famous relics were not necessarily famous for their miraculous properties.

Sometimes they were famous because you could see versions of them all over the countryside.

"I expect most of them were bought as part of bribes. They were bought from noblemen or royalty, despite being obvious fakes, as a way to give money without losing reputation. The noose Saint Emela used to hang herself when she was martyred is a perfect example. If you tied together all the ropes supposed to be her noose, they say it would be too long to stop her feet from touching the ground, even if she'd found the highest tree in the world."

There was also the supposed right eye of a great sage that was said to be able to see into the future—and Lawrence knew of four churches that purported to house this mighty eye.

It was no more rare than finding a craftsman who claimed to make spears that could pierce anything with a shop next door to an armorer who claimed his armor could turn aside any blade. Such things were common the world over.

"But you may not find what you seek there, Mr. Lawrence. The golden sheep is a thing of legend, and it hasn't left so much as a single concrete artifact behind. As far as tales go, there's the story of the soldier who tried to pluck a piece of its golden wool, but..."

"No, chasing what we're after is like trying to catch a cloud, so it's nothing like that. But while a cloud might be impossible to grasp, its presence in the sky is still a fact. Essentially—"

"—You're looking for the evidence."

"Precisely. If there's a patron saint revered by shepherds or something connected to them, it might serve as proof that the abbey is aware of the golden sheep. Thus, the golden sheep could be supposed to exist."

Lawrence knew the reasoning was somewhat forced, but occasionally such pronouncements were necessary for persuading a customer. Piasky, whose job it was to lead settlers to a notional promised land that was little more than simple wilderness, seemed familiar with the concept.

He nodded significantly and then smiled a wry smile.

"Still, as you said, there seems to be little of interest here." Lawrence looked the list over quickly and then handed it to Col and Holo. Both of them had waited patiently as they were well aware of the roles they were playing.

Piasky glanced at them and then spoke to Lawrence. "I'm sorry it wasn't any use to you... though I suppose it's strange for me to be apologizing."

Lawrence couldn't help but laugh at Piasky's joke.

"We looked over that list countless times," Piasky continued. "You can find the items on it all over the land. A few of them could be sold off straightaway for a good price, but... to be honest, I have my own reason for showing you the list."

"You do?" asked Lawrence, which Piasky smiled regretfully at.

"Yes. I was wondering if there's something there that hides a deeper purpose."

At Piasky's words, Lawrence looked again at the parchment his two companions were examining carefully. It seemed to be nothing more than a list of the kinds of trinkets any wealthy abbey or church would contain. He didn't feel any particular significance to any of them, nor any special connection to the land. It seemed like nothing more than a peek at how wealthy people wasted their money.

He understood what Piasky meant, though.

Piasky wanted to know if any of the items had been bought not simply out of a sense of pride, but rather out of a true sense of purpose or belief.

His motive for doing so was not difficult to understand. The abbey was steadfastly refusing the Ruvik Alliance's efforts, so Piasky was looking for a chance to break that resistance.

Understanding the opponent's desire was the key to negotiation.

"Just earlier I was in the sanctuary, conducting standard negotiation. The abbey's solidarity was admirable as always—even as their finances are tight, and they beg the royal merchants for funds to conduct the spring thanksgiving festival."

"Their finances are that poor?"

In answer to Lawrence's question, Piasky nodded and sighed. "Daily living expenses, building upkeep, candles for prayer, parchments for manuscript copying, paper, book purchases, shepherds' pay, livestock feed over the winter...and those are just the basics. On top of that, since they're an important abbey, there's the exorbitant cost of the bishops' meetings they must host every few years, the costs of welcoming important guests, the maintenance of their sister abbey, and the huge tribute they owe the pope in the south. What's more, the king views them as a convenient source of coin in exchange for overlooking their possession of such power and influence. Given all this, their fall cannot be far off."

Even an abbey could not completely sever itself from the outside world, and those connections meant it was impossible to avoid accommodating the world's ways.

And their predicament was worse than Lawrence had guessed.

"They've amassed a huge fortune thanks to their wool sales, so they've plenty of men able to figure profit and loss. And I'm sure

there are some among them who would like to reach a realistic compromise. But still, the council remains united in its rejection of the alliance's requests."

"And you believe that solidarity is because of some peculiar conviction?"

Without support of some kind, they wouldn't have been able to continue resisting—particularly if their group contained more than one opinion. If they had united in defense of God's glory, Lawrence doubted Piasky would have expressed such doubts.

While it contained men who loved money, the abbey also had those whose prayers were genuine. And yet obtaining a decision was proving impossible, much to the frustration of the alliance.

"Heavy investment in a holy relic would fit the circumstances. The devout among them would accept it, and if it could be turned to profit, it would be the perfect support during this difficult time. So if we can simply find what they're clinging to and take it from them, I believe they will crumble."

It was a very direct strategy.

But when Lawrence looked at Holo and Col, he saw a glimmer of an idea deep in the pair's eyes, despite their appearing to find nothing of interest on the parchment.

The story of the wolf bones—if it were more than a simple tale spoken of during drunken tavern conversations, it would fit Piasky's theory perfectly.

"I believe it's a good idea...and the idea that with so many fakes in the world no one would possibly put their faith in a relic would serve as good cover."

"Indeed...you're quite right."

Lawrence said nothing about the wolf bones because, given the circumstances, doing so would only weaken his position. His opponent was the Ruvik Alliance, to whose power the port town of Kerube could hardly compare.

If he slipped up and got involved with them, it was unlikely he would escape unscathed.

Col and Holo, too, seemed to understand this.

He looked down at the parchment again.

"To tell the truth, after your visit last night, Mr. Lawrence, I was so excited I could hardly sleep." Sitting in his chair, Piasky smiled a self-deprecating smile. It was as though he was finally showing the exhaustion he'd been hiding all along.

Piasky's words a moment earlier—"*We looked over that list countless times*"—came to Lawrence's mind, albeit with a slightly different meaning this time. He imagined Piasky up late at night, poring over the paragraphs by candlelight.

"Any clues that would break this deadlock would be more precious than any gospel to us. I can't describe to you the sense of futility I felt after checking over that parchment again and again. And yet I thought perhaps...perhaps you or your companions might be able to help. Hence my ulterior motive in showing it to you."

"I'm sorry we couldn't be of any use."

Piasky and Lawrence both laughed at these words.

A baker might sell bread at his shop's counter from birth till death, but merchants spent their lives swinging between extremes of hope and disappointment—yet undaunted always tended toward hope.

But something bothered Lawrence, so he asked about it. "This is a rather boorish question, but..."

"Yes?"

"If the alliance is really able to buy the abbey's land, will it be so profitable?"

The Ruvik Alliance had not been formed to pursue the meager profits of a small-town trading company.

They commanded trading vessels and warships, and if a town

was imposing tariffs to protect their own merchants, the alliance could use sheer force of arms to open that town's gates.

Lawrence had heard of many transactions the alliance had conducted, each one so large as to make one wonder if there could really be so much money in the world.

For so many merchants to be coming here attached to such an alliance meant that the potential profit had to be vast. And yet it was impossible for a traveling merchant like Lawrence to concretely imagine such profit.

Just how would it be realized?

Piasky smiled a bit bashfully and scratched his nose with a finger. "I myself can't imagine the exact number of coins. But one thing I can say, it would profit many, many people."

Unable to imagine it, Lawrence repeated Piasky's words. "Many people?"

It was true that the alliance contained many people, so that was true as far as it went, but it still seemed like a strange choice of words.

"Indeed. I assume you are aware of the general idea of what we're trying to do here, yes?"

"You're trying to purchase the stricken abbey's landholdings, then use that to bring around the nobility, allowing you to participate in kingdom politics."

"Exactly so. However, if we simply handed the purchased land over to the nobility, they'd just squander it—on daily extravagances or on lavish donations to churches or abbeys, either for appearances or out of a sense of piety. Or in the long run, it would simply be divided into smaller and smaller pieces over the generations until they fell into ruin. Neither they nor we profit that way. So to avoid that, people like me have been summoned."

Piasky spoke in an even, patient tone. It was not because he was

used to talking about this, nor because he was used to explaining things, nor even owing to his natural inclinations.

It was simple confidence—the singular calm that comes when one has pride in one's work.

Holo noticed this and looked up.

Lawrence finally understood why he had been fixated on Piasky. Piasky had the firm footing of the peerless master craftsman, and Lawrence could not help but feel nervous around him.

"We plan to take ownership of the abbey, buying up its unused lands and allowing people to immigrate there. We're going to make villages and towns."

Lawrence considered the piles of documents in Piasky's office and the room adjacent to it. This place was essentially an atelier for people like him.

"Since the abbey's left the land fallow, most of the landed gentry haven't been able to bring in adequate earnings or even provide farmers with enough land to live on. On the mainland, war, famine, or floods have driven countless people from their homes. With no work or money, they have no choice but to either beg or steal. The more such people there are, the greater the threat to stability."

"So your alliance is going to lead such people to a new land, giving them a place to live and work, while at the same time putting in your debt the landlords whose holdings are plagued with vagrants."

"Yes. It will improve the situation for both sides. And it's not simply about money. It may sound arrogant of me to say so, but when you've experienced giving a new home to someone who's lost theirs..."

Insincerity and charity were a hair's breadth apart. The smile of one who understood that truth was a pleasantly wry one.

"...You can't stop. It's enough to make you pore over a parchment, looking for the tiniest hint or clue."

Holo's hand had stilled, and she listened intently to Piasky. Lawrence could hardly blame her.

Holo had claimed not to care about Piasky's work, but if she were really so myopic, then all her laments over the course of their travels had been lies.

Beneath the parchment, Col grasped Holo's hand steadfastly.

"Some immigrants were scattered from their homes when pirates razed their village. Stolen from their families, they thought they would never see their loved ones again—but upon hearing of the immigration, they journey to the new village and are reunited. That's why I cannot stop. Such things do happen."

In fact, they happened regularly and were not at all uncommon.

In his travels, Lawrence was often asked by people in towns if he had seen so-and-so or whether such-and-such village still existed after a war in the area. Sometimes he would even encounter former slaves who had been taken from their far-off homelands before finally saving enough money to buy their freedom. When they asked for news of their hometown, it was so far away that Lawrence could scarcely believe it.

And such stories were not limited to humans.

Holo, too, was one such wanderer; in that moment her face looked like a statue, and if Lawrence had touched her cheek, he was quite sure that tears would have flowed freely.

"Because it involves so many people, there's naturally profit to be had. Anybody affiliated with the alliance is treated well when they arrive in towns the alliance founded. But it's not just that. Anyone who's traveled about doing business is especially sensitive to the word *homeland*. There's a sentimental reason we've fixed so stubbornly upon the abbey. If it were just for ourselves, we could hardly persevere so mightily. It's because we wish to help others."

These last words rang almost painfully true to Lawrence.

It was because of Holo that he had been able to come this far.

"Ha-ha—I've bored you with my blathering."

"Not at all," said Lawrence in response to Piasky's self-deprecating smile. "Not at all. I understand. I'm the same way."

The instant Lawrence said as much, Piasky seemed to grasp why he was traveling in this queer little trio of his. Piasky looked at Holo and Col in turn, both of whom smiled sheepishly back.

Piasky nodded, speaking slowly. "If you don't mind my asking, might I inquire as to your homeland?"

"They're both from the north. On the mainland. From different places, though."

Piasky neither widened his eyes in surprise nor made any expression of sympathy. Instead, he asked a sincere question, one merchant to another.

"And you're after the treasures of your home, then?"

With war came plunder, and the Church's suppression of the pagans was no different from any other war. There were no small number of pagan items that once taken came to be highly valued as holy relics. Indeed, it was owing to the high probability of recovering such plunder that the Church kept sending forces in to quell the pagans.

"Essentially, yes. They're searching for traces of their homelands, and I need their knowledge. It's something of a miracle that I encountered them at all."

"I see... So, you found a patron to fund your investigation, and the two of them found a guide. Fate certainly is a mysterious thing."

"Though it's hard to know whether I should thank the heavens for it or not."

Piasky forced a grin at the joke, which at the very least was hardly suitable for an abbey. Such forbidden humor was all the more amusing for its inappropriateness.

"My apologies. Still... if that's the case, I won't hesitate to help you. Please, feel free to ask anything of me."

"Showing us what you have is already more than enough. My thanks to you."

Piasky wasn't being so accommodating simply because he was an excellent merchant. It was because, Lawrence was sure, he was a genuinely kind person.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," said Piasky, as though he couldn't help expressing the sentiment.

It was clear to Lawrence that Piasky had his current job not out of love of profit, nor even out of a desire to be thanked by others.

Though it pained him to admit it, Lawrence was no match for the man. And he realized that Holo had noticed this the moment she met him.

What if she'd met him first?

Lawrence was not confident enough in himself to stop the thought.

There was a knock at the door, and when Piasky opened it, it appeared to be a messenger from the alliance. While Lawrence didn't intend to listen in, the conversation came to his ears nonetheless—it seemed Piasky was being summoned.

Piasky gave the messenger his reply and then turned around. "You'll have to excuse me. It seems I'm being called."

As far as the alliance's reasons for coming to the abbey went, this building held the most significant of them. Lawrence and his companions could hardly remain there without Piasky to accompany them.

Lawrence carefully took the parchment from Holo and Col and then returned it to Piasky with a bow. "You've been a great help to us."

"Not at all. This is the least I can do, and I'll happily do it again."

Simply seeing his guileless smile was worthwhile.

Lawrence, Holo, and Col filed out of the room, followed by Piasky, who locked the door. It was a strange feeling, knowing that in this place the future homes of many people were being planned. Holo's vaguely dreamy expression was surely due to the same sentiment.

"We'll be going, then." Lawrence and company took their leave from Piasky, who immediately headed for the green-bannered inn while they walked in the opposite direction.

The weather was pleasant, and looking up at the sky, it was easy to forget that the ground was still covered with snow.

The trio was silent, each of them lost in their own thoughts.

But just before Lawrence was about to break that silence, Holo stopped in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" Lawrence and Col stopped and turned after walking a few seconds more.

Holo looked down, her hood hiding her facial expression. It was clear enough from the slump of her slim shoulders that she was not feeling well.

"You go on ahead. I wish to walk a while."

Her mouth appeared to smile, but how many times had Lawrence wished that she would save her smiles only for those times when she felt genuine happiness?

Col seemed nearly unable to restrain himself from going to her side, but Lawrence held him back.

"Just mind you don't catch cold. Taking ill here comes with plenty of prayer."

"Fool." Despite the terse response, a large puff of white vapor came from Holo's mouth. Then, just like that, she turned on her heel and walked off.

Col clutched at his chest as he watched her recede, then looked up at Lawrence. It was not as though he failed to understand why she would be acting this way, though.

Just as a picture was worth a thousand words, there was a great difference between hearing a sort of work existed and seeing the reality of it. So the impact of hearing that Piasky's work was the creation of new towns and new homes and actually seeing the place where such work took place was likewise different.

And Piasky was a good person to boot. He acted not out of love of money, but neither was he naturally selfless.

Midway through her walk, Holo broke into a trot, then rounded a corner and disappeared out of sight, which made Lawrence's heart ache.

Holo might well have been wondering the same thing he was—what if she'd met Piasky first.

"Should I have gone after her?" Lawrence breathed in the cold air and then exhaled hotly.

Though they stood in the middle of the street, they did not stand out, owing to the many other merchants standing and conversing in the area.

Lawrence took another breath and started walking.

"I don't know what would be best. But I think Miss Holo would have been happy."

It was an exemplary answer, and Lawrence found himself wanting to pat Col on the head for it. But exemplary answers were not always correct.

"Even though my own homeland still exists?"

Col took a sharp breath and stopped. Lawrence did not stop, however, and Col soon caught up with him.

"Sometimes God seems fit to comfort us, though he lives in the heavens free of aging or sickness."

If Holo was a genius of banter, Col was an expert in persuasion. Since his own feelings were unwavering, his words always rang true. And thanks to his studies of Church law, he could easily quote scripture to his advantage.

But Lawrence was an ever-wandering traveling merchant who lied even to himself, and he could not accept such straightforward reasoning.

"I'm sorry. If there's one thing I know all too well, it's my own lack of courage. I'm afraid that if I go to her side, I'll be rejected."

"I doubt that."

Lawrence stopped and noticed that Col was even a bit shorter than Holo. The height difference was enough to make him look imposing to Col, no doubt, whether he was trying to or not.

Lawrence's expression was hard, but not because of Col's cheekiness, nor thanks to the cold. He started walking again and waited the few seconds it took for the hesitant Col to catch up before speaking.

"But it's not as though I think so little of her. I don't think she's sad or lonely so much as I imagine her heart's been disturbed a bit. She's only ever wondered whether her homeland still exists or not—the idea of making a new one has never occurred to her. So I want to believe she's uncertain how to manage the feelings she's having now."

They arrived at the shepherds' dormitory, and Lawrence put his hand to the thin door's handle. They both entered, and he continued.

"I can hardly be involved in all of Holo's affairs, nor can I hope to solve all the problems she faces. The only thing I can do is dedicate myself to doing for her what I can."

As Holo would want. In the best ways he knew how.

He added some straw to the dying fire in the hearth; it quickly caught fire, sending sparks dancing up.

"I'm sure you and she noticed the mention of the wolf bones."

"... You mean the clue Mr. Piasky is searching for?

"Yes. Just as we saw in Kerube, all holy relics are highly valued, and depending on how they're used, they can help support a

faith—like trying to catch the golden sheep, thinking it was sent by God. You could say that's exactly the sort of thing Piasky's looking for."

If the abbey had indeed purchased the bones, even knowing they were from a pagan god, it was hard to imagine anything that would more thoroughly prove the depth of their conviction. It would unite the abbey council, saving the abbey as a whole both practically and religiously.

But it was an ironic truth that the cleverer a conclusion was, the easier it was to poke holes in it.

A lie was always harder to expose when it was simple.

Lawrence had abstained from giving Piasky any information because he did not feel it was a decision he should be making alone.

"Mr. Lawrence, why... Back then, why didn't you...?"

Holo had most likely noticed Lawrence's caution at the time, and even Col had probably understood most of it. After all, he had only to think back to what happened in the port town of Kerube.

"Because this information would be enough for them to make an important decision on. It's quite obvious how much we could have distanced ourselves from them, in that moment—and the alliance, too, hardly wishes to base its actions on hearsay from people it knows nothing about. Once they'd gotten assurances from me, I could end up being forced to take responsibility for any failure or bearing the brunt of the attack in case it came to a head-on confrontation with the abbey."

"So you're saying you wouldn't have been able to stay uninvolved?"

"Yes. Their power is too great. If we tell them what we know, and they consider it worthy, it would overturn not just the list of holy relics, but all the investigation they've done on the abbey's dealings and holdings. And if the bones truly do exist, then

they'll surely find evidence of them soon. That's the sort of people we're dealing with. And here in the snowy plains, none will come to our aid."

At least in Kerube there were many people around. But here, even the name of the Rowen Trade Guild was weak.

"It's true that we could take the risk and escape on Holo's back if things turn dangerous, but if we're going to do that, Holo may as well have bared her fangs right from the start. But she would like to avoid doing so as much as possible. In addition to her conscientiousness, she tends to worry."

"..."

Holo often spoke to Lawrence in a complicated, roundabout fashion, rarely explaining her true feelings, which made misunderstandings inevitable—but she seemed to be clearer when speaking with Col.

Since Col seemed to understand what Lawrence was getting at, despite his condensed explanation, the boy's conjecture was probably accurate. Not just accurate, in fact—given his pained expression, there was a good possibility he'd heard Holo's true feelings.

If so, he was probably wondering how two supposed adults could act so childishly. Holo surely would have laughed if such a candid question had been put to her.

Why not simply be honest?

"So as long as she wishes it, I'll continue to take risks. It's the least I can do." He paused and watched the burning straw turn to ash, smoke wafting lazily up.

It felt as though he were looking at his own self, pretentious though such a notion was.

"You said earlier that I could still be of comfort to Holo, even though my own homeland still exists."

"Y-yes!"

"I still find that hard to imagine. And what if she asks me to create a new home for her? That would put me in a difficult situation. And yet..."

The right corner of Lawrence's lip curled up of its own volition for the very same reason that he was willing to take such great risks for Holo.

"And yet I can't bear to see her ask such things of anyone else."

He could never admit as much in front of Holo, but it was the unvarnished truth.

Col's face was frozen in place unsurprisingly. He surely did not want to hear such a painfully embarrassing statement from an adult.

But Lawrence felt a strange sense of exhilaration and a certain pride, and he thrust his chest out and continued jokingly, "So I suppose I'll just have to find another way to entice her, eh? Something that'll make her forget all about Piasky and his work."

It was a calculating, self-serving way to think, but it was clearly drawn from a different place than his former inclination to labor mightily for every single silver piece.

Back then, not even giving his confession in a church would leave his heart feeling clean. Indeed, it would only become part of his calculations—*now I'll be all right for a while.*

Of course, this was all solely about Lawrence, and his listening audience undoubtedly found it unbearable.

But Col was a bit better behaved, simply turning away as though overcoming his embarrassment.

"But of course, I can't tell her that, and quite honestly you have the worst of it, being subjected to our back-and-forth as much as you are."

At these words Col finally looked up and seemed about to say something. He opened his mouth as though to speak, but in the end simply looked down again.

Lawrence found this odd. "What's the matter?"

Col's shoulders flinched. Though he so often gave honest answers, this time he simply looked away. And then, like that, he spoke in a very small voice. "I'm... sorry."

"For what? What possible reason could you have to apologize?"

Something in the hearth gave way with a small sound, and a puff of ashes floated up.

Perhaps that had been the sound of some epiphany flashing through the boy's mind or perhaps it was simply the sound of his face freezing in place.

Col shrank into himself, a look of extreme contrition on his face.

It was done.

Lawrence covered his face with his hand, his shoulders sagging.

He was now quite certain she'd heard everything.

At some point during their time in Piasky's office, Holo had given Col secret instructions, and he'd cooperated in letting her see what his reaction would be once she said she wanted to be alone.

Every word he had uttered came back to him. But for his last shred of pride's sake, he decided not to run.

He stood and patted the terrified Col's head lightly, then walked past him and toward the door.

The thin wood of the door was no great barrier to sound—not that it would matter either way to Holo, who stood unapologetically on the other side of the door.

"'Tis rather impressive that you don't think of me as some weakly sobbing female, but honestly, 'twas unbearable hearing such embarrassing things." Holo smiled maliciously.

Her cheeky grin made him want to debate and browbeat her until she cried out for mercy. How many times had this face gotten the better of him?

And Lawrence found himself infuriated each time it happened, as Holo's japes were always constructed to emphasize his own stupidity.

"So you don't wish to see me entreat another for help?" she said. "You're simply too adorable for... You—"

Her fangs flashed as she spoke, and she extended her index finger to poke Lawrence in the chest, but then—

"...! Nngh...!"

While it is true that anger kept bottled up will finally burst free, in this case it was more like a cornered rat biting the cat that hunted it.

At first Holo was surprised and shrank away, but she soon regained her composure and started to struggle, trying to escape despite her obvious concern for Col's reaction.

But as long as she remained in this form, the difference between her strength and Lawrence's was obvious.

Some indeterminate amount of time passed before Lawrence let her hand go—and the instant he did, Holo took a deep breath and slapped him across his cheek good and hard, so it must have been quite a while.

Lawrence staggered, musing that he really was no match for her—but it was not the quickness of her hand that made him think so.

Despite having slapped him, Holo's face was not colored with anger. Far from it, her expression was kind; she even smiled faintly.

"That makes us even."

Just which one of you was it that set this up? Had her smile not been genuine, he was quite certain he would have wanted to put that question to her. But no matter how much he wanted to object, the words wouldn't come—because her smile was real.

"That makes us even."

"...It does," he answered, which Holo gave a satisfied nod at and pushed past him into the room.

"Col, boy, for a duty well executed, you shall have your reward," she said, pressing her cheek to the cheek of the astonished Col and gently stroking his head.

Lawrence saw Col's face go red and mused that he was still a child—but if he let the sentiment show on his face, there was no telling what trap Holo might have prepared for him.

He closed the door and returned to the hearth.

Holo embraced Col from behind and gazed at the fire as she spoke. "I'm thinking to leave today or perhaps tomorrow."

"Wha—?" Col exclaimed, starting to look behind him. But as Holo's face was right there, he seemed to think better of it.

Holo smiled and continued, "With both of you, of course. We'll return to that port town—Yiku or whatever it was—and find some tasty food, drink our fill of wine, and sleep. The two of you should get some rest since it'll take three days in the snow to make our way back."

Col seemed to think this was a strange way for her to be speaking. His face betrayed his confusion, but Lawrence didn't find it odd at all.

He had more or less anticipated this, and if it was what Holo wanted to do, he did not mind.

"You'll sleep till midday thanks to the wine. And when you awake, the three of us will come together and eat as we leisurely discuss whether or not to cross back over the sea. After all..." Holo coughed to hide her chuckling, then wiped the corner of her mouth before continuing, "If something had happened the previous night at some far-off abbey—a great wolf attacking, say—you wouldn't know the first thing about it. And surely no one would think to connect you to such an event. You'd have been having a quiet, peaceful time, with no risk or danger at all."

When she finished speaking, Holo looked at Lawrence. "How about it?" said the expression on her face, which looked ready to break into a smile at any moment.

Holo had decided she could not let Lawrence put himself in danger for her. Yet she was not prepared to retreat empty-handed.

So she had chosen the most practical, easiest method—that was all.

"If that's what you want, then I don't mind. I've already said as much, after all."

"Aye. And I've made quite sure of your feelings. To doubt them now would make me the fool."

If her smile had been a bashful one, it would have been quite charming, but Holo's face was as full of mischief as ever. But of course, that was why she was Holo.

A meek Holo would be like jerky without salt.

"I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. When humans see me, they fear and serve me. But if I were afraid myself, what sort of fool would I be?"

She would employ the power of her true form. But even when she did to protect those she cared for, the people she protected might yet look upon her with fear. How much more fearful might they be when she transformed to accomplish her own purposes?

Lawrence certainly understood Holo's fears, but he still wanted her to show some faith in him.

"We can't leave today. Tomorrow or the day after perhaps."

"What say you, Col, my lad?" She asked either out of mischief or an effort to hide her own embarrassment.

It seemed that Col was stunned to have his opinion asked; after he got over his surprise, he hastily agreed.

"Well, then, that decides it. This means you'll end up hearing nothing that might profit you, though I'm not inclined to

apologize for that," she said, resting her chin on Col's shoulder, which did not make Lawrence feel like taking her terribly seriously.

Depending on how they were used, the wolf bones could potentially bring Lawrence great profits, but misfortune tended to follow those who tried to gain more coin than their coin purses could hold.

A coin purse was like a stomach—gluttony could make it burst, and death would follow.

"If you're feeling sorry, then why not try an apology?"

Her jape repaid with another jape, Holo grinned. "Kindly forgive me, then."

Lawrence laughed at the absurdity of it and then sighed, surrendering to the peaceful camaraderie.

At the same time, he let slip a few more words. "I suppose this isn't so bad once in a while."

It was a fine, clear afternoon.

There was no more need for a fire in the hearth.

CHAPTER FOUR



To journey back through the snow would require a certain amount of preparation.

This was why merchants so frequently boarded in inns for weeks and weeks during the winter. Even the most familiar, well-trod road became a foreign country when it snowed. Worse, a treacherous spot looked no different from a harmless field when covered in snow.

Winter travel required many things—a guide, a stout horse unfazed by deep snow, knowledge of lodges and cabins in which to pass the night. Travel took more time so food and water rations had to be calculated appropriately.

But fortunately, as long as there was demand, there would be supply. And it was no overstatement to say that the merchant quarter of the great Brondel Abbey was filled with travelers as far as the eye could see. Lawrence went to Piasky to ask after the services of the packhorse driver who had guided them on their way in.

Piasky was busy with documents at the alliance inn and was momentarily surprised at Lawrence's announcement that they would be leaving. But as winter travel required quicker resolve

than summer journeys, and as Lawrence had compensated him rather generously for his services, Piasky readily agreed to help.

When a search for knowledge gave no results, a quick retreat was called for. If one had time to idly waste, it was better spent hurrying on to the next goal. While merchants greeted one another with happy smiles and handshakes, they parted just as happily.

It was a rather lonely way of getting by, but it had its advantages.

"This should put everything in order, then."

"I very much appreciate it."

"No, not at all. I've hardly been much help."

They exchanged merchants' pleasantries that were meaningless, though it would not feel right to skip them.

However, the handshake they shared next was anything but meaningless.

Just as a person's qualities could be seen in their bearing, their history came through in their handshake.

The moment of that handshake was the one that decided just how long a person's face would remain in memory.

Lawrence took Piasky's hand firmly and fixed his face solidly in his mind. He hoped Piasky would remember him equally well.

"I think we'll be able to leave tomorrow. Although..."

"Although?"

"A regular delivery from the capital in the west just arrived, and evidently the weather there is terrible. A messenger expected to arrive today still hasn't been seen. Doubtless that same weather will arrive here soon."

A blizzard could turn the entire world literally pure white. The most capable horseman in the world would do them no good at all.

"I've naturally no inclination to persevere in the face of a blizzard. There are three things you don't defy: the Church, an infant, and the weather."

Piasky smiled and nodded. "With luck, it will veer north. And since the shepherds should return soon, I'll ask their advice. They'll have the best knowledge of conditions outside... Ah, Mr. Lawrence, aren't you staying in the same lodging as they are?"

"We are. It's the best place to gather such information." Lawrence gave a quick bow after this joke and then put the alliance inn behind him.

Outside, the approaching twilight lent a melancholy tone to the air, and the sky was indeed cloudy, with a bit of wind.

The merchants in the street had a quickness to their strides, their heads filled for once with thoughts of a warm dinner rather than money. For his part, Lawrence had not only his promise to uphold to prepare dinner for Huskins, but there was also Holo to think about.

"A blizzard?"

Having tossed the last of the ingredients into the pot, Lawrence handed the ladle to Col to mind and went to sit on the bed by Holo, who was grooming her tail.

"The weather may turn bad. If it does, our departure may be delayed. Two days, even three..."

"Mm... now that you mention it, you may be right. My nose has gone numb from smelling naught but sheep." Holo sniffed twice, then sneezed. Once accustomed to travel, there were even some humans who could predict the weather with their nose. "Ah, well, I suppose it's too late to complain about a few days' delay, isn't it?" She grinned mischievously and chewed the tip of her tail.

Lawrence held up both hands in his usual display of surrender.

Holo chuckled, giving her tail a final stroke before falling back on the bed. "So, then, what of dinner?"

"It's not finished boiling yet. And we're waiting for Huskins to return."

Holo hid her fluffy tail beneath her robes quite adroitly, but she had not pulled her hood over her head yet. Lawrence followed her as she went, and when she rather rudely stopped to snatch a piece of jerky from the pot, he covered her ears with the hood.

"Sho, whensh he coming bhack?"

"Soon I imagine. There's no moon tonight, and there's the cold."

Col was wrapped in a blanket as he sat by the hearth and tended the pot, and whenever anyone spoke in the room, their breath turned to white vapor. Outside the windows, the wind was growing stronger and stronger, and the night's weather looked to be turning bad.

"Mmph... well, I'm hungry."

"And he's out there raising that mutton. You should pay him some respect."

"Aye, but when have you paid *me* any respect?"

It was hard for Lawrence not to immediately reply with, *"And just when did you raise me, hmm?"* It was all he could do to express his frustration with a reserved "Honestly."

Holo grinned at Col, and the softhearted Col only smiled a chagrined smile.

Just then, Holo's gaze flicked to the door, and Lawrence knew their company had arrived. And from her cautious expression, he knew, too, that it wasn't Huskins.

Perhaps it was Piasky? Lawrence wondered, just as there was a knock on the door. Col, who was used to doing such menial tasks, opened the door, and there stood a shepherd with his cane.

"Ooh, what a lovely smell. Huskins is putting up good travelers, indeed." He seemed to recognize Col, patting the boy's head before clearing his throat. "Apologies. It seems Huskins will be spending the night in the sheep barn. The snow's already begun to come down, you see. My two companions and I barely made it back with our lives."

"I see... We're sorry to make you go out of your way."

"Not at all. There's nothing so hard as waiting for a comrade to return, not knowing when or whether they'll come."

Coming from a shepherd of these snowy lands, this statement carried a special weight. When both darkness and snow fell from the sky, all people could do was huddle around their fires, wondering if their comrades were alive or dead.

"All the more so when there's a tasty dinner waiting!" said the shepherd with a huge smile and then raised his hand. "That's all!" he finished, then walked off.

A merchant would have asked for a cup of soup before leaving, but shepherds were not such greedy creatures. All they relied upon out on the wide-open plains was their staffs and their sheepdogs.

Perhaps their great pride came from that independent spirit—and in any case, that pride of theirs reminded Lawrence very much of a certain wolf. Though he was quite sure that if he said so to Holo, he would truly bring her anger down upon him.

"So that means we'll have to wait until at least the day after tomorrow. Let us hope the harbor doesn't freeze solid," said Lawrence, closing the door and turning around.

Holo stole the ladle from Col. "Aye. Let us hope our soup stays unfrozen as well, eh?" She appeared quite pleased, given that she seemed not to think particularly fondly of Huskins. Of course, no small part of that was doubtless due to the share of meat Huskins would have been spared.

"It's not even done cooking yet," said Lawrence as he added a not inexpensive piece of firewood into the hearth.

That night...

Col had quickly fallen asleep, followed not long after by Holo. Outside the window, the wind howled. Their room's window was

not the only one clattering loudly, mixing with the occasional sheepdog's bark—perhaps they, too, were being affected by the unpleasant atmosphere.

The night before a blizzard was ever thus.

This time there was a difference, though. Usually Lawrence would be unable to stay warm no matter how many blankets he wrapped around himself, but this time he was almost too warm.

Holo's tail was there, and nothing was better than another warm body to keep the cold at bay. On that count, Holo's was always a little warmer, like a child's, and with wine in her, she was warmer still.

Outside the blankets it was almost painfully cold, but within them, it was as warm as spring.

Yet there was a reason he could not sleep.

The current episode was showing him quite clearly that he could not hope to solve all of Holo's problems. And what haunted him still more than that was the question of what to do next.

If Holo bared her fangs and settled the question of the wolf bones, this chapter would come to an end no matter what the outcome.

If they existed, the story would be over, but it might end even if they didn't. Lawrence couldn't imagine any monk capable of lying while his head was between the jaws of Holo in her true form.

If the answer was that the abbey had not purchased the bones or had already resold them, would they continue to pursue them?

And what if the bones had gone south? Traveling there was possible, but in addition to the expense, it would mean throwing away all the business he'd built up over the course of his trade route. And if it was too long, his customers would be unable to receive goods they were counting on, and the trust he had worked so hard to foster would vanish.

There was a limit to the detours Lawrence could afford.

Though he might wish to consider his dramatic, adventure-filled travels with Holo, just as the abbey was unable to escape its financial woes, so too did Lawrence have to make a living.

The simple, obvious truth was that he would only accompany her as long as he was able to.

Holo certainly understood that, but as soon as Lawrence began to consider simply making straight for Yoitsu, peaceful sleep became nothing more than a memory.

If they headed for Yoitsu, how much longer would he be able to stay with Holo?

And the biggest problem was what would happen once they arrived there. The problems they'd kept putting off were expanding now, like yeast in bread.

What did Holo think? At the very least he now knew she regarded him with some fondness.

But she was not a child, and the world would not simply accommodate their preferences. They would have to be prepared. Holo was the Wisewolf of Yoitsu, and he was a simple traveling merchant. A relationship that crossed social classes was cause for worry enough, and that was when it was between two humans.

So how prepared would they need to be?

Holo lay next to him; he smoothed her chestnut-brown hair and placed his hand on her head. When she fell asleep after drinking, she wouldn't wake even if he pinched her cheeks. In carrying her drunken body to the bed, he'd earned the small reward of stroking her head.

"..."

Holo's hair slipped through the spaces between his fingers like silk.

She is so dear to me, he thought.

He wanted to stay with her as long as he was able, even if it was

absurd, even if it made him miserable. No matter how foolish it seemed.

But as soon as the thought occurred to him, he heard a quiet answer. *Are you truly prepared to make such a decision?*

Lawrence sighed and stopped his hand.

Though he might wish to borrow the wisdom of a wisewolf, he knew it was a problem he had to solve on his own.

Resisting the urge to curse, he looked again at Holo beside him. He was quite sure he had never made so pathetic an expression in his entire life.

"—!"

He froze, but not because Holo's deep, sleeping breaths had stopped, nor because he had noticed her trying to hide her laughter.

He thought he heard something—the sound of something being dragged perhaps.

"...?"

Holo seemed to still be sleeping as she had been, the sound of her blissfully ignorant breathing barely audible from where her face was buried in the blanket.

Lawrence listened carefully but heard only the sound of the shutters rattling and the wind howling.

Perhaps some snow had slid off the roof, he mused, relaxing—but just as he did so, he heard the sound again. This time it was definitely not his imagination.

He raised his head, listened intently, and heard it again.

There was no mistaking it.

Lawrence slowly inhaled, letting the frigid air flow into his lungs. He then quickly emerged from within the blankets, placed his feet on the creaky floorboard, and stood there in the stabbing cold.

He unsheathed his knife, opening and closing his right hand around its handle. Thieves were surprisingly common in places

like this. They evidently exploited the lowered guard that came with seeing only familiar faces.

Continuing to the room with the hearth and opening the door there, Lawrence could now clearly hear the dragging sound.

The sound of a staff.

If it was a thief, he was giving a poor accounting of himself, and Lawrence was not so foolish as to mistake the sound for stealthy footfalls. But who could it be at such an hour?

"Nn... mph..."

Holo rolled over in bed, seeming to notice that Lawrence was no longer there.

She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and looked in Lawrence's direction questioningly.

But her sleepy-girl act ended there, and she soon took notice of the footsteps, her eyes becoming wolf's eyes.

With movements so quick it was hard to imagine she was still drunk, she threw off the blankets, but could not win against the cold and shivered once.

The footsteps were very close now.

Shfff... tup... tokk.

Holo looked back and forth between Lawrence and the doorway. She seemed to want to ask who was there, but Lawrence did not know himself.

The sound stopped at the door. Slowly the handle was turned, and the door opened...

"... Hu—" Lawrence began, but didn't have time to finish before rushing toward the figure, who started to collapse.

And then Lawrence was speechless. In front of him was a snow-covered, barely alive form that looked very much like Huskins but was hardly human.

Lawrence found himself utterly unable to form words.

"..."

Icicles dangled from the figure's eyebrows, and it was impossible to tell whether the beard that rimmed his mouth was ice or hair. The hand that gripped the staff was caked in encrusted snow, and it was impossible to tell where the hand ended and the staff began.

His breathing was quiet. Eerily quiet—and beneath the snow and ice, only his eyes moved, glancing this way and that.

No one spoke.

Their demonic visitor's back was oddly shaped—from his head sprouted a curled ram's horns and his knees were jointed backwards, like a sheep's.

"...Oh, God," murmured Lawrence, mostly unconsciously.

That instant, the ice covering the demon's face split with a small *krak*.

By the time he realized the demon was smiling, Holo was right by his side.

"...A wolf, eh..." As he spoke, the icicles dangling from his beard clattered against one another.

The voice belonged to Huskins.

"Had you not the time to disguise yourself?"

"..." Huskins smiled wordlessly and slowly wiped his face with the hand that did not hold his staff.

He looked as though he had endured something that would have long since killed a normal man.

"You're here to mock me, then?" Holo's voice was colder than the air in the room.

The half-man, half-beast demon called Huskins narrowed his eyes, as though he were looking into a bright light, staggering as he tried to stand. Lawrence reflexively tried to support his shoulder.

He was a demon. That was it—he was a demon.

But Lawrence had a reason for lending him a shoulder to lean on—Holo had not tried to hide her ears and tail.

"...Is it not natural...for a sheep to hide itself before a wolf?"

The sound of cracking ice accompanied his movements.

Lawrence helped Huskins over to the hearth, where he sat.

Shortly thereafter came a small cry—the sound of Col's gasp upon awakening.

"The best place to hide a tree is in the forest, eh? I never noticed."

"...I am not like you." Huskins fixed Holo in one eye.

Lawrence could tell from Holo's ears and tail that Huskins's words had disturbed her.

But she still had the ability to admit reality. She nodded. "And?" she said grudgingly.

Huskins was a being similar to Holo. In and of itself that did not bother Lawrence. His travels thus far had taught him that such creatures did hide in human civilization—in ominous forests next to towns, in segregated districts where townspeople feared to tread, or in fields of wheat, long after the villagers had lost faith in them.

So if anything, Lawrence was calmer than Holo as they waited for Huskins to speak.

"I have...a favor to ask."

"A favor?"

The melting ice refroze in the chilly room.

Huskins nodded again emphatically, sighing as he spit out the words. "It's a calamity...one far beyond my power to deal with."

"So you wish to borrow mine?"

At Holo's question, Huskins seemed to nod—but when Lawrence realized Huskins was not nodding, but rather shaking with mirth, Huskins put a trembling hand to his breast and produced a letter.

"Your power is your fangs and claws...but the age when such things ruled has passed. I give you this..." He directed his gaze to Lawrence.

"To me?"

"Yes... to the man who travels with the wolf. I let you stay here because... I wished to observe you. But I believe it was the will of the gods."

"Hah, the gods, you say?" Holo bared her fangs and laughed derisively, but her intimidating, contemptuous expression elicited only a cold smile from Huskins.

"Just as you cling to this strange, gentle human... so, too, do I cling to the gods. That is all."

"I-I do not—I hardly—!" Holo objected mightily, at a rare loss for words.

The difference between Huskins and Holo was like that of an old man and a child, and it was not simply due to the disparity in their appearances. For example, Huskins regarded the sputtering Holo but gave no triumphant, boastful smile. Quite the contrary, his expressionless face seemed to be somehow tender and kindly.

"You're a merchant, are you not? Take this."

"What is it...?"

"I found a strayed shepherd in the snow. Such things often happen... my sheepdog found him. He looked to still be praying, though the life had already left him."

It was a single sealed letter. Written on sheepskin parchment with hair still on it, it was sealed with a red wax seal.

If the man had died out in the snow, he must have been a messenger from some other town bound for this one and had gotten lost on the way.

Unless travelers hurried, they would be caught by the snow and wind and night, but hurrying rapidly exhausted their reserves of strength. It was such a common occurrence that there were even thieves who specialized in finding their corpses once the snow melted and taking their belongings.

"In the end, I am a mere sheep. You understand, do you not,

young wolf?" Huskins directed his words to Holo. Holo clutched her chest, as though a secret she held had been revealed.

"In the face of this letter, our strength means nothing," finished Huskins, giving a heavy sigh. He closed his eyes.

The firewood had now fully caught the hearth's flames and burned very brightly. The ice on Huskins's body was finally beginning to melt, and Col had recovered enough to busy himself tending to Huskins, who seemed to find the attention pleasant.

At some point his body had reverted to human form, and it seemed like his earlier monstrous form was something out of a dream.

But as she continued to stand and look down on Huskins, Holo's ears remained uncovered, her tail occasionally visible.

Lawrence looked at the contents of the letter Huskins had given him. And then he understood what Huskins had meant.

"Mr. Huskins. What do you need my help for?"

"The abbey..." Huskins paused for a moment, then closed his eyes and smiled thinly. "...I want you to protect it."

"Er, I'm sorry, but—why?"

Huskins opened one gray eye and regarded Lawrence with it.

His gaze was steady and dignified, the gaze of a wild sheep that had roamed step-by-step across the vast plains.

It was different than Holo's.

If Holo's gaze were a sharp dagger, Huskins's was a great hammer.

"It's no surprise you'd wonder. Why would I, of anyone, bow down before God? You see, I too have relied on humans to live. Just like the young wolf."

Instantly Holo seemed ready to refute him, but she was stopped by a glance from Huskins.

He was treating her like a child.

"I do not mean to anger you. I have taken human form and live a human life. It is no surprise I sought human strength."

"Hmph. So, what have you done with this strength you've borrowed from the humans?"

"A home."

"Eh?" Holo replied, her eyes widening.

Huskins continued, his voice and manner still quiet and clear. "Made a home. On this land. A home of our own."

The firewood crackled.

Holo's eyes were like full moons.

"Nothing escapes the grasp of humans. Not the mountains, the forests, or the plains. So in order to create a place that would endure unchanging for centuries, we had no choice but to use their power. At first I was unsure whether it could succeed... but it did. A vast, quiet homeland was ours. And no matter who comes or when, they always say the same thing."

"... This place hasn't changed."

Huskins smiled like a kind grandfather and took a deep breath. "It's our greatest desire. We were driven from our home long ago and scattered. Some to desolate wilderness, others hiding among humans in their towns. And some wandered endlessly... This is a place where we can all meet again. A place to which all may return, no matter how far afield they live. This place."

"That which scattered you... could it have been, was it the Moon-Hunting...?"

"Ha-ha... hah. So you know that much, do you? That will make things simpler to explain. Yes, it was indeed the Moon-Hunting Bear that took our home from us. *Irawa Weir Muheddhunde* in the old tongue."

They had seen many stories of the bear that had been collected by a certain priest back in a tiny, meager town that worshipped a snake god.

Holo took a deep breath, like a child with a strange way of crying.

"When the calamity came, we were powerless, and there was nothing we could do. And now times have changed, and to protect this place, we need a new kind of power. The devices of humans are too fine for my hooves."

When seeking a favor, it was very difficult to maintain an equal footing, neither abasing oneself nor being too demanding—nor too prideful.

But Huskins accepted the world as it was, and within it, did what he was able. And there was no doubt he had done so for centuries. So it had to be possible.

"We've had many troubles thus far. But this time, finally, they may be more than we can handle."

Lawrence looked at the letter, then back to Huskins. "... This is a royal notice of taxation, isn't it?"

"It was easier when the lords were still warring. The reason of our own era was enough to gain some small measure of stability then. But the long wars devastated the land. If the abbey were to fall, all would be lost. So I secretly aided Winfiel the First in unifying the nation. And that is where I erred."

They were stronger than humans, and wiser, and had ruled the land before humans swept across it. The turn of ages was a common matter to them surely.

"But children never remember the debt they owe their parents, to say nothing of grandchildren. I can no longer take the public stage. All I can do is occasionally show myself to add a bit of legitimacy to their rule."

"The legend... of the golden sheep."

"Quite so. Of course, a few of those moments were due to my own carelessness when greeting a friend I'd not seen in ages."

Jokes were all the more amusing when told in an inappropriate place and time. But once the ripple of ensuing laughter was over, it left behind a now obvious sense of nervousness.

"I've no head for counting coins, but even I can tell the abbey is on the verge of ruin. With each round of taxation, the pay we're due falls more behind. Our friends have told us the abbey may not endure another round."

"But this is..."

"I no longer know what to do. If I could stamp it with my hooves or grind it with my teeth, I would do so...but you're a merchant, are you not? When humans drove our kind from the forests and mountains, there were always merchants in the shadows. To see one such merchant laughing with a wolf..." He heaved a long sigh. "You're the only one on whom we can rely."

"But—"

"I beg you."

Lawrence had traveled alone for seven years. Many times had he delivered a final letter from a fallen comrade to a family. Confronted with a scene he did not wish to remember, his words failed him.

If it were a simple letter, he would accept it. But what Lawrence held in his hands was a royal notice of taxation.

"No." As Lawrence continued to struggle for words, it was Holo who spoke up. "No. We cannot take such a risk."

"Holo..."

"If you cannot do it, you must refuse. And you yourself said that getting involved in this business was dangerous. We shall leave tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then the day after. We are travelers. This has naught to do with us."

After this barrage of words, Holo's quick, short breaths were all that remained.

Had she seemed merely serious, Lawrence would have been angry, but Lawrence instead stood there blankly, leaving Col to tend to Huskins. When Holo came to her senses and looked at Lawrence, she shrank away.

Her expression was hard to describe.

Her tense lips made her seem angry, but she was trembling as though deeply sad. Her shoulders sagged, her fists clenched, and her face was very pale.

Lawrence could barely stand to look at her.

It was her jealousy that made her this way.

"Su-surely 'tis so, is it not? You said as much yourself. You said that it was dangerous. That is why I said we should leave. And yet—and yet you're considering his request...!"

"Holo," said Lawrence, taking her hand. She pulled away once, then again, then a third time, and then was docile.

Tears fell from her face.

She knew perfectly well that what she was saying was childish. She'd been able to endure listening to Piasky because his work was meant for humans. But Huskins was another matter entirely.

Worse, Huskins had lost his homeland to the Moon-Hunting Bear, which had also destroyed Yoitsu.

Huskins spoke. "Young wolf, was your home destroyed by him as well?"

Holo looked at Huskins with eyes that swirled with jealousy, envy, and agitation.

"We did not gain a new homeland easily. We took human form, became shepherds, and lived our lives quietly and unobtrusively. And we were prepared to do whatever it took to defend this land."

"I could—!" Holo's hoarse voice was somehow small, even as she cried out. "If it were to bring back my homeland...my Yoitsu...I, too, could..."

"I cannot but think you've never fought the bear, have you? Are you prepared to risk your life battling it?"

Holo's face filled with rage. She surely thought Huskins was mocking her. Yet Huskins quietly and steadily gazed into her furious, red-tinged amber eyes.

"When he came to my homelands, I ran. I ran, you see, because there were many who I knew needed my protection. I led them away, and we escaped. I can remember the moment even now. There was a great full moon in the sky that night. I could see the ridge of the mountains across the vast plains, and above it shone the bright, bright moon. And we fled the plains—those fertile plains whose grasses we'd long grazed upon."

Huskins body was visibly weakened. Like Holo, assuming human form surely subjected him to human limitations.

And yet he continued, the words falling from him as though the hearth's flames were melting his frozen memories.

"I looked back in the direction of my home, and I saw it. The shadow of a vast bear so huge it looked as though it could sit on the ridge of the mountains. It was beautiful—even now, I think so. It roared, it raised a paw up as though to hunt the moon, and that moment still..."

The tale was from the distant past, when the hand of humans had yet to reach out—an era when the world still belonged to darkness and spirits.

"Even now, I think upon it fondly. It was the last great ruler of our world. It was a time when power and might ruled all. All my anger has left me. All that remains now is my nostalgia..."

Holo had missed the fight for her homeland and had only learned of its destruction centuries later—so forcing a childish smile was probably all she could manage. "F-for you, who ran like a coward, to speak of preparation... it is to laugh."

It was childish stubbornness, and the wily, old Huskins countered it with ease.

"To live among the humans in their world, I started eating meat. It's been centuries now."

"...!" Holo's eyes immediately went to the drying meat that hung from leather thongs. What kind of meat was it? And what

kind of meat had been in the stew they had eaten with Huskins? After a few gasping breaths, Holo vomited.

Lawrence did not know if she had imagined herself doing the same thing Huskins had done or if she was simply prone to tears.

Huskins had been willing to eat the meat of sheep in order to pose as a shepherd.

Could Holo do the same thing?

"To keep this, my homeland, we have given up much. We have crossed lines that should never have been crossed. And if it is lost, we may never find another land where we may live in peace."

He did not say these words to attack Holo. He was simply trying to be as clear as he could in defending his reasons for asking Lawrence's help.

But still, Holo was envious of how Huskins had created a new homeland here.

She herself knew full well how foolish it was to envy someone who had struggled to re-create something they had lost. And not only that—she wanted to turn her back on them, to abandon someone who'd created a new homeland.

If she was interpreting Huskins's words as an attack, it was because of her own guilt. Holo was caught between reason and emotion and finally chose to run.

She burst out crying like a child, and Lawrence caught her as she collapsed on the spot.

Huskins waited for Lawrence to put his arm around Holo before slowly speaking.

"...I'm well aware that your young wolf there has suffered greatly in this world. And by some unfathomable luck, she's come to travel with a kindhearted human. I understand that she doesn't wish to part with that. I understand that she wishes to protect it. But...," said Huskins, slowly closing his eyes. "I, too, do not wish to part with this land. Our hard-won refuge..."

His words trailed off, and Col hastily put his hand to Huskins's broad chest. Seeing Col's obvious relief, it was clear that Huskins had merely exhausted himself.

Lawrence listened to the crackling firewood and the sobbing Holo as he looked over the notice of taxation Huskins had given him. The order of taxation written there would be extremely difficult to refuse.

The best way to avoid paying taxes was to protest that one had no assets with which to pay, but the king had chosen a solution that would render such protests meaningless.

The king's resolve was clear, and there would be no wriggling out of it. If there was any hesitation, it would be met with military force. That might even have been the real goal.

A single pack could not be led by two heads—Holo had told him this, but it held true for a nation, as well. The abbey, with its great influence and huge tracts of land, was certainly a headache for the king.

Ruin if they paid the tax. Ruin if they didn't.

From this impossible predicament, the abbey needed salvation—by Lawrence, a mere traveling merchant.

"It's—it's impossible," Lawrence murmured without thinking.

Picking up on his words, it was Col who looked up. "*Is* it impossible?"

Col had ventured out into the world to protect his own town. His eyes were deeply serious, almost accusing Lawrence.

"...Once during my travels, there was an accident. The road was muddy from rain the previous day."

At the sudden change of topic, Col's face showed a rare flash of anger. Lawrence was a merchant, and merchants often used clever misdirection—and Col knew it.

"The lead cart sank into the mire. We hurried to it and discovered that the merchant driving the cart was fortunate enough



to be alive. He was flat on his back and looked quite embarrassed. He seemed to be injured, but we thought he'd survive. We thought so, and so did he..."

Lawrence continued to stroke the sobbing Holo's back as he spoke to Col.

"But his belly had been opened. A tree branch had gotten him maybe. He didn't even realize it until he saw our expressions. He smiled stiffly and asked us to save him. But we weren't gods. All we could do was stay with him until the end."

Sometimes there was nothing to be done. That was the way of the world. There was no divine mercy, no heavenly fortune, and time could not be turned back.

Lawrence sighed and continued.

"It's not that I wasn't sympathetic. But I also know the God who's supposed to deliver us seems to be so often absent. All I can do is be glad it wasn't me."

"That's not—!"

"That's all there was to do. And after I saw my unlucky friend off, I stood up and continued my journey, after taking as much from his cart as I could." One corner of Lawrence's mouth curled up. "It was a nice profit," he added.

Col's face distorted, and he seemed about to scream at Lawrence, but in the end he did not. He looked down and resumed his work of drying Huskins's wet hair and beard.

When faced with unavoidably trying circumstances, immersion in work could bring salvation. Lawrence wondered how long ago it was he had learned that. He thought about it as he picked Holo up. She was quiet in his arms as he took her to the next room, though whether she had cried herself to the point of exhaustion or simply passed out from stress was not clear.

The snowstorm raged outside, but because the snow had long

since accumulated in the cracks in the walls and windows, it was not terribly cold.

Holo's breathing was quick and shallow, as though she were suffering from a fever. She was probably having a nightmare or else her guilty conscience was continuing to assail her.

He laid Holo on the bed and turned to go attend to Huskins, but she tugged on his sleeve. Her eyes opened just slightly. Those eyes had abandoned shame and pride and simply implored him to stay by her side.

It was not clear how conscious she was, but Lawrence stroked her head with his other hand, and Holo closed her eyes as though reassured. Slowly, one finger at a time, her hand let go of his sleeve.

In the next room, illuminated by the redly burning hearth fire, Col struggled to change Huskins's outer layer of clothing. In addition to the difference in size between the two of them, Col was not terribly strong to begin with.

Lawrence silently set about assisting, and while Col did not thank him, he also did not turn the help away.

"There's no danger in considering it at least."

Col's face showed surprise, and he said nothing in response. He looked up and paused.

"Pull there, please."

"Ah, y-yes!"

"There is no danger in considering the possibility. After all, at the moment, we're probably the only people who know about the contents of this letter."

Huskins's things had been arranged in a corner of the room, and from among them, they found clothes for him and removed his soaking-wet shoes.

"Given how important the message is, I can't imagine they'd

send just one copy. Once the blizzard is over, I'm sure someone will arrive bearing the news. Which means we have a few options."

Whether or not to tell anyone else about the letter. And if so, whom.

"Do—do you think anything can be done?"

"That's hard to say. But we can make some predictions. The abbey is cornered and so is the king. If we suppose that they're each employing their strategies of last resort, there are not very many possible outcomes. What's more, the Ruvik Alliance is also involved."

Col gulped and hesitantly asked another question. "Will Miss Holo be all right?"

This cut to the heart of the matter; it was like a wound—when touched, some would groan in pain, and others would bellow in rage.

Lawrence was the former. "...This is unbearable for her, and she was unable to accept things as they are, so that's why she spoke as she did. But so long as the situation permits, she'll offer her help. Despite how she might look, she's quite kind. Which you're supposed to find surprising, by the way."

Col wrapped Huskins's feet in cloth to prevent frostbite, then added another log to the fire. Finally, he gave a tired smile.

"She knows perfectly well how unsightly her jealousy is. In the face of Huskins's resolve, she must've felt like a child. Her pride as a wisewolf has been terribly wounded."

Holo's pride and vanity were second to none, but she also knew when to joke and when to act in earnest. And when she was in earnest, even Lawrence had to acknowledge her excellence.

"I once told Holo something."

"What was that?"

"That there are many different ways to solve a problem. But

once it's solved, we must live our lives. Which means we should choose not the simplest solution, but the one that will allow us to feel most at peace once it's done."

Huskins was wrapped in a blanket so not even a bit of drafty air could reach him. In place of a pillow, they wrapped a piece of firewood in another blanket and placed it under his head, finishing their care of him.

"And when I told her as much, she called me a fool. As though giving up on me. But I wonder if she could really abandon Huskins and move on so easily as that."

No doubt Col had imagined Holo simply eating, drinking, and curling up like a dog or cat. But Lawrence found it difficult to believe she would abandon someone who had endured such hardship in creating a second home.

Col shook his head once, then a second time, more strongly.

"As for where you stand, it hardly bears saying." Lawrence smiled, and Col's face went rigid as though a great secret of his had been revealed. He looked down, ashamed.

Even if Lawrence and Holo had decided to abandon Huskins, Col would not have done it, Lawrence was sure.

"Anyway, so far it's an emotional argument."

"So far?" Col's eyes looked up uncomprehendingly, and even Lawrence found himself wanting to hug him. Having Col around was certainly good for his pride and vanity.

"I'm a merchant, after all. I don't act unless there's some profit in it."

"...Which means...?"

"This notice of taxation. If Huskins's words and Piasky's guesses are to be believed, it will wipe out the abbey entirely. Which means this is a perfect opportunity for us. They say before a great wave comes, the sea recedes and lays the ocean floor bare. Thus..."

Col answered immediately. "You'd be able to see all the treasure that used to be underwater."

"Exactly. If there's anything there, they won't be able to hide it. As far as Holo's original goal goes, this is hardly useless. Although whether she chooses to take it by force will be up to her."

Col nodded and then slumped over as though relieved. "I'm just not as clever as you are, Mr. Lawrence."

Col was probably thinking of Lawrence's ability to see things from many perspectives. Lawrence's wordless smile and shrug were no act. If Holo had been there, she would have known.

Not many humans could lie to themselves, after all.

"The night is long, and we have a fire. Col—"

"Yes!"

"Lend me your wisdom."

"Of course!" Col shouted and then hastily covered his mouth.

Lawrence made ready a pen and paper and began to draw up a plan.

The movements of an insect's wings are hard to see, but the wingbeats of a great hawk are easily counted. Thus, a large organization's actions were easier to predict than a smaller one's. All the more so when they were cornered.

But good information was scarce.

They knew the abbey was in the midst of a financial crisis. That the king's failed policies had emptied the kingdom's coffers. And that the king had decreed a tax that would (and this was supposition) ruin the abbey.

What they did not know was what form the abbey's final assets would take. Did it have—as Lawrence predicted—a valuable holy relic like the wolf bones, or were its assets in coin?

Lawrence neatly wrote what facts they had on the upper half of

the paper. The remaining half listed the choices available to him and his traveling companions.

For example—who should be told of the notice of taxation? The alliance? The abbey? Or should they tell no one?

Next, there were a similar number of choices regarding how to deal with the story of the wolf bones.

Their options seemed at once too few and too many; the unknown elements remaining were likewise. The monastery was in a financial crisis, and even if the leaders were unable to survive another round of taxation, there was no way of knowing whether they would stubbornly defy the kingdom or meekly do as they were told, submitting to the threat of military force like so many sheep.

Realistically speaking, there were no options Lawrence and company could pursue entirely on their own.

Perhaps their only real choice was to go to the alliance with what they knew, carefully trading small pieces of information in order to expand their knowledge, then force their way into the proceedings somehow.

Of course, there were risks. But victory was not impossible.

After all, even if the alliance had the abbey by the throat and was trying to somehow tear it out, they were not some clumsy mercenary band that would devour the carcass all the way down to the bones.

Just as they knew how to harvest wheat, they knew how to increase their harvest. They were perfectly aware that a steady stream of small profit was better than a single great gain.

And because a successful harvest required stable land, the abbey's continued existence would be a high priority for the alliance. They were surely looking for a solution that ensured the abbey would go on.

Lawrence and Col passed the night thinking the problem

through, top to bottom. They considered each and every possibility, deciding whether it was worth the risk. The raging blizzard and cold before the dawn kept their thinking sharp—or perhaps it was Lawrence's understanding of the way the world worked, combined with having Col at his side.

Around the time the hearth fire was quietly burning itself to ash, Lawrence and Col had found a miraculous possibility and written it on the paper.

Holo's happy face and Huskins's surprised eyes greeted him as he revealed the plan to be—

"…—"

He triumphantly presented his conclusions to Holo. And that very moment, he woke up.

The charcoal fire and the falling snow sounded very similar to each other. Lawrence tried to estimate from the crackling sound how long he'd been asleep.

The only thing he could not remember were the specifics of the miraculous plan. No—he understood now.

It had been a dream, and worse, that he had had exactly that sort of dream was now written all over his face.

"Fool."

He was slumped over the crate on which he had been writing; when he sat up, Holo was crouched by the hearth.

The word echoed more pleasingly in his ears than any church bell could.

He yawned hugely. His neck hurt terribly, probably from the strange sleeping position.

"You fool…"

Two blankets were covering him.

Holo turned away from him as she called him a fool; next to him was Col, curled up and seemingly clinging to Holo's tail.

Her face was hollow-cheeked, probably because she had cried

herself out not long before. Or perhaps she was just cold; she was not wearing her robe.

Lawrence finally realized it was not so much her appearance as it was the general atmosphere that made her look poorly, and just then Holo sighed and spoke.

"Aye, how lucky I am." Her words and expression were completely unrelated, and yet she seemed to speak even more truly than she did when praising a piece of fatty mutton. "This world so often does not go as one would wish, and still."

With his mouth half-open and his sleeping breath utterly silent, Col almost seemed dead at a glance. But when Holo gently stroked his head, he shrank away ticklishly.

"Our God tells us to share what we have with others," said Lawrence.

"Even our good fortune?" Holo asked, bored.

If he misstepped in his response, he was quite sure he would receive a cold sigh in response, along with a disinclination on Holo's part to listen to him further.

"Even our good fortune. I think I've put that into practice quite nicely."

"..."

"I even let Col use that tail of yours," he said quite seriously.

Holo only smiled a defeated smile, then smoothly moved her gaze over to the window.

"My body felt as though it were aflame."

"Was that—"

"—because of what I said?" Lawrence was about to jokingly finish, but could not bring himself to.

But Holo realized how his joke would end and seemed surprisingly happy at it. Her ears flicked, and though she still faced away, her shoulders shook with laughter. "Ah well, all creatures are alike in that they tend toward selfishness. It has been a long time

indeed since I've felt such envy for the belongings of another. 'Tis almost comforting."

Lawrence paused before replying, to make it clear that what he was about to say was in jest. "Well, of course it was comforting—it's always a comfort to be so childishly selfish."

Holo was not the type to kick away someone who was begging at her feet. It was her nature to try to grant any favor asked of her, no matter if it did her no good, no matter if it angered her—that was why she had stayed in Pasloe for so many centuries.

"Humans and sheep think the same way."

"Enough for you and I to argue about it certainly."

"Mm. Unless we fight over the same thing, curse each other with the same words, and glare at each other from the same height, it is not a true fight."

She sat and stroked Col's head, occasionally laughing as she spoke, the breath rising in white puffs from her mouth. Lawrence could imagine her as the goddess of some forest, so elegant and gentle her form.

Unlike when she was bundled up in layers of clothing, her slender frame seemed unrelated to any idleness or debauchery.

Lawrence regarded not a weak girl who needed his protection, but the ancient wisewolf Holo, god of the harvest who lived in the wheat.

"I have a little wisdom and experience. Col has intellect and imagination."

"And what do I have?"

"You have a responsibility," said Lawrence. "A responsibility to turn our travels into a tale that will be long told. Isn't it perfect, the tale of a wolf coming to the aid of sheep?"

For authority to exist, it needed the support of a sturdy system of values. Taking responsibility for one's words was exactly that.

Holo opened her mouth, and from between her fangs issued another large puff of vapor. She smiled, amused.

It was the childish smile of the scheming prankster. If one were lost in the woods and being attacked by bandits, if there were anyone to call upon for aid other than God, it would be someone with this very smile.

"Is there any chance for victory?"

Lawrence did not reply, only shrugging and handing Holo the paper upon which he had been sleeping. Holo looked at this face and laughed—no doubt it was smudged with ink.

"I have a measure of confidence in my own cleverness... but this sort of situation is not my specialty." She must have been referring to broad, encompassing ways of thinking. If one could always rely on might to solve one's problems, there was no need to consider the fine details of a situation. "Of course, an old mercenary general once said that one cannot continue winning battles with a single strategy. Constantly shifting tactics are the best way to defeat one's opponent. And—"

"And?"

"Only the gods are capable of that."

It was a mischievous joke.

"Remember that," Holo's expression seemed to say, yet she did not appear at all displeased.

"The question is whether the abbey does in fact possess the bones. And that seems very likely."

"Yes. Nothing else fits the story Piasky told us so perfectly."

"You should ally yourselves with the pack you already know, not the abbey, don't you think? Nothing is so frightful as an ally whose thoughts you cannot divine." As she spoke, Holo's eyes flicked over the scrawled writing on the paper, where Lawrence had written the results of his talk with Col, reading it with great speed.

They had once fought mightily when Holo pretended to be illiterate, but now Lawrence wondered if she was a swifter reader than he.

"Yes. The men of the alliance aren't fools, and given the men like Piasky in their employ, they want stability for this land. Huskins and his people may find their territory a bit smaller, but their goals are similar."

Holo narrowed her eyes, like a wealthy noblewoman evaluating a precious gem, but her gaze was directed at Huskins, who still slept by the fire.

But when she realized that Lawrence was watching her, she looked back at him and grinned in embarrassment.

Lawrence was too frightened to make sure, but he guessed there were more years separating Huskins and Holo than their appearances would suggest. Holo's sense of duty and her queer integrity probably led her to give Huskins a measure of respect for his greater experience, even if he was a sheep.

For Holo, extending a helping hand to another might not have sat well, even as she took pride in it.

"So what can Kraft Lawrence, a mere traveling merchant, hope to do here?"

She so rarely called him by name that to hear it felt to Lawrence like something of a reward in and of itself, which he had to admit was strangely pathetic.

Lawrence grinned a fearless grin, like a man challenged to drink a cup of strong liquor in one go. He took a breath and answered slowly. "The wolf bones must be of crucial importance to the other side. Our information points to them as being the only real possibility. So the information will be taken very seriously, and the greater its potential to break the stalemate, the more seriously it will be taken. And that's where traveling merchants like me have room to maneuver."

"And this is the way of it truly? Are you sure this is correct? Will all truly be well? Truly? For certain? I believe you—I trust you, I do." Holo laughed as she posed her childish questions.

Lawrence took in each one, elbow propped on the crate, with the poise of a proper merchant. "In exchange for the proof, I'll ask you to hear a few of my questions, as well."

"The notice of taxation or whatever 'tis called will make them starved for time."

"I don't think they'll be able to avoid the negotiating table. Once a messenger arrives with the notice, there will be very little time left. If they dawdle, the profit will vanish. Better the coin purse starve than the belly, they say."

"Hmph." Holo sniffed as though mocking his optimistic prediction and turned away, unamused. "'Tis well, I suppose."

She thrust the paper back at him, and Lawrence received the royal decree politely, rolling it up like a nobleman given an order from the king. "Well, then, so be it."

And with those words, Lawrence was again a merchant—slave to contracts, servant of coin.

And one of the hidden kings that controlled the world from the shadows.

"Now, then." Lawrence had neatened his beard, combed his hair, and straightened his collar.

Everything had to be perfectly in order before commencing with a business plan, though he was well aware that nothing truly proceeded according to plan.

The first problem would be finding a way to make the Ruvik Alliance take the bait of the story of the wolf bones. If he could not succeed in doing that, nothing else could happen.

"I suppose I'm off."

Seen by an outsider he would have seemed a dwarf about to

enter a giant's lair—but back when he had been first starting out, every merchant had seemed a giant to him. He had managed to survive among them, so he would manage this, too. Holo and Col saw him off, and he put the shepherds' dormitory behind him.

Still suffering from the effects of his march through the blizzard, Huskins was not yet recovered, but his color improved noticeably upon Lawrence informing him that he planned to cooperate.

Huskins had always supported the abbey in secret, so as far as the abbey was concerned, he was a shepherd like any other.

Thus, it was probably true that the only person Lawrence could count on was himself.

Conditions outside were still awful with buildings mostly covered in snow. Only a few eaves were still visible with small patches of stone or wood managing to peek out.

But even in such conditions, no merchant could simply sit still and wait. When Lawrence finally arrived at the alliance inn, another man was returning there from the building across the street.

"Ho! To think we'd have a customer so early, even in this weather."

"Of course. The worse the weather, the larger the gain."

"Ha-ha-ha. Too right!"

Perhaps he was a member of the Ruvik Alliance; he did not hesitate to open the door and hurry inside.

Lawrence followed behind him. One of the merchants just by the entrance asked, "Looking for Lag?"

Evidently they had already remembered him. "Is it written so obviously on my face?" Lawrence asked, rubbing the face in question.

The man laughed. "You'll find him in the study." Given that the man who minded the front door looked like something of a theology scholar, no doubt the word *study* was an apt one.

"My thanks to you."

"Here for business?" It was the standard merchant's greeting.

Lawrence smiled pleasantly. "Indeed. Big business."

Then he was out in the snow again, making his way to Piasky's place of work.

Lawrence told the theology scholar–seeming man at the front desk that he wanted to see Piasky, and the man disappeared inside without even asking Lawrence's name.

His job was probably to watch for spies coming from rival alliances. As Lawrence was considering the possibility, the man returned and wordlessly gestured inside.

Lawrence bowed and proceeded in.

As he approached, Piasky opened the door and waited for him.

"Good morning to you."

"And to you. What brings you here?" said Piasky, closing the door behind Lawrence as they entered Piasky's private room.

Piasky was surely aware that Lawrence would not brave the terrible weather for idle chitchat.

Lawrence patted off what snow still remained on him, cleared his throat to conceal the nervousness he felt, and put on his best merchant's smile. "Actually, something happened last night that bothered me."

"Bothered you? Please, have a seat." Piasky offered a chair, in which Lawrence sat, and rubbed his nose. He opened and closed his hand, dropping his gaze to it. It was an obvious affectation, but that was probably appropriate.

"Yes. It was so extraordinary that I couldn't sleep at all for thinking it over," said Lawrence, pointing to the bags under his eyes.

A merchant that came to a negotiation with tired eyes could not help but be regarded with a healthy measure of suspicion. But Piasky simply laughed. "Oh?"

The blizzard outside raged, and the stalemate continued. An extraordinary tale was the perfect companion for some wine.

"Whatever could it be? Don't tell me you've found a way to break the abbey's resistance."

This was the moment to strike. "Yes, that's it exactly."

The smile on each man's face froze, and Lawrence did not know how much time passed like that.

Piasky rubbed his hands several times, his expression unchanging, then silently rose and opened the door.

"And?" he asked, a split second after closing the door again. Evidently Piasky was something of an actor himself.

"Are you familiar with the port town of Kerube, across the Strait of Winfiel?"

"I know it. It's a trade point between the north and the south. I've never conducted business there, but the delta there is a fine place."

"Quite so. That's the town. Are you familiar with a silly rumor that arrived there around two years ago?"

Piasky was a merchant who lived on the road, so he might not have heard of it—or so Lawrence thought—but Piasky made a face as though something had just occurred to him and then put a finger to his lips. Was he going to speak his mind?

"As I recall... something about the bones of a pagan god?"

"Indeed. The bones of a wolf."

Piasky looked off into the distance, as though thinking something over. When he looked back at Lawrence, his gaze had become guarded, as though genuinely surprised he had brought up something so unlikely.

"And what about those bones?"

If Lawrence had to guess, Piasky's humoring manner meant that he was either making fun of Lawrence or he simply found the situation completely absurd.

Lawrence nonetheless mustered up the energy to reply. "Suppose the abbey purchased the bones."

"The abbey...?"

"Yes. Even if they are the bones of a pagan god, they could be used to reinforce the authority of the Church's God. They could be used to preach to all who gather in the sanctuary to pray for salvation, and they could be treated by the abbey as an investment, becoming something for those searching for a practical way to break the deadlock to cling to."

Piasky let Lawrence finish, then closed his eyes, his expression bitter—and not because he was taking Lawrence's statements seriously. He was surely considering how to gently reject the idea.

"I think that even if wool sales have been falling over the years, it would take a certain amount of time for the situation to become this dire. The abbey would have chosen a way to shelter its assets years ago because the nation's coin has been falling in value all along. For one, they would buy up goods with that coin—if possible, goods that could be sold anywhere in the world for about as much as they'd been bought for. That way, if the local currency did indeed crash years later, the abbey could sell the bones for foreign currency and then bring that coin back to this kingdom. And just as we were able to stay at that fine inn in Kerube, they'd be treated as the richest men in the land."

Piasky seemed sincerely troubled by Lawrence's froth-mouthed explanation.

"What say you?" Lawrence asked.

Pressed by Lawrence, Piasky held up a palm as though to say, "Wait, I'm too shocked to speak."

When Piasky finally did speak, it was after clearing his throat three times. "Mr. Lawrence."

"Yes."

"It's true that what you're saying seems plausible."

"It does," Lawrence said with a happy smile. He was well aware of the sweat breaking out on his brow.

"But we are the Ruvik Alliance. That is... This is difficult to say, but..."

"What is?"

If Holo had been there, Lawrence was sure her eyes would have gone round at his acting.

"Well, er, I'll be blunt. We long ago considered that possibility."

"...Huh?"

"It's a well-known rumor. And well—" Piasky sighed as though he simply couldn't stand to hold back any longer. "Truly, many people, many of our brightest comrades have put their minds to this problem."

Lawrence fell silent, still leaning forward.

Piasky spread his palms and looked at Lawrence out of the corner of his eye.

Lawrence looked away, then looked back at Piasky, and then averted his eyes again.

A gust of wind rattled the windows' shutters.

"We concluded that no such relic existed. When the story first appeared, one of our men was in Kerube at the time, and he looked into it through a company we're connected with there. What he found was that only a single other company was searching for the bones, and it was a half jest even to them. They didn't have the size to purchase a true holy relic, nor did they have such funds. It was just to improve their reputation. Such things happen, you know, after drunken boasting in taverns or exchanges of jokes."

His long-windedness came from anger, it seemed. Anger at having had his time wasted.

Or anger at having hoped for more and been made a fool of.

Lawrence had no response. He shifted in his chair, rubbing his hands uneasily. An awkward silence descended.

"It's just a fairy tale," Piasky finally spit out with disdain. Lawrence pounced.

"And what if it isn't just a fairy tale?" Had he been unable to smile as he said it, Lawrence would have been a third-rate merchant.

He grinned. He pulled his chin in and looked at Piasky with an upturned gaze.

"...Surely you jest." Piasky was then silent for a while before replying, and while his expression feigned placidity, Lawrence did not fail to miss the way he casually dried his palms.

"I will leave it to you to decide whether I am in earnest or not."

"No, Mr. Lawrence, you must stop this. If my reply was unfair, I apologize. But we've all thought this through together very thoroughly—that's why I lost my temper. So please—"

"So please don't upset you by saying such baseless things?"

The shutters rattled, and the windblown snow audibly impacted against them. It sounded like a ship being battered by waves, and Piasky's face was starting to look distinctly seasick.

He bit his lower lip and widened his eyes, his face paling.

"Fifteen hundred coins."

"What?"

"How many crates do you suppose it takes to hold fifteen hundred gold *lumione* pieces?"

Lawrence could still clearly remember the image of the Jean Company proudly carrying a mountain of crates into the church.

Piasky's face twitched into a stiff smile. "M-Mr. Lawrence." A trickle of sweat left his temple and rolled down his cheek.

Facial expression, tone, even tears—all of these could be feigned by a skilled actor.

But sweat was not so easy to fake.

"What say you, Mr. Piasky?" Lawrence leaned forward in his chair, bringing his face close enough to Piasky to tell what he had eaten for dinner the previous night.

This was the moment of truth.

If Lawrence couldn't snare Piasky here, his claws would never reach his next prey.

"I'd like to continue to use you for all contact with the alliance." Piasky would surely understand what he meant. He gazed at Lawrence fearfully, like a pilgrim with a blade held to his throat.

"We can break this stalemate. I'd like you to take that critical role. It's not such a bad proposition, is it?"

"B-but..." When Piasky finally spoke, his words smelled of fine wine. "But do you have any proof?"

"Trust is always invisible." Lawrence grinned and drew back.

Thus mocked, Piasky started to turn red, but Lawrence quickly continued and headed him off.

"The abbey wouldn't be so foolish as to write 'wolf bones' in their records. They would make up some other term and record that instead. But nothing can stay hidden forever. If you read over the records expecting to find nothing, nothing is precisely what you'll find—but if you suspect something of being hidden and look again, things may be different. What say you, eh?"

Piasky had no reply. He seemed unable to.

"To be perfectly honest, I happen to have something that lends some credence to the story of the wolf bones. But truthfully, it's too big a story for a traveling merchant like me. If I told this directly to the alliance officials, there's no telling whether they'd trust me or not. I need someone to vouch for me."

Lawrence had brought goods from far-off lands into many towns, and he had built up some experience with such situations. Having someone local to the town or village agree with his sales pitch could make a tremendous difference.

Lawrence was not so naive as to believe that simply telling the truth was enough to earn trust. A single person might not be able to sell even the finest goods, but two people could make a killing selling nothing but trash.

That was the truth, and it was the secret to trade.

"But..."

"Please think it over. I did manage to win Mr. Deutchmann's trust in the port town. Me—nothing more than a simple traveling merchant."

Piasky breathed out a pained chuckle and then closed his eyes.

Lawrence had heard that particular saying came from the capital of the great southern kingdom, whose trade network had grown over the decades into a net that covered the land, like a great spiderweb. Lawrence had never visited the city, but he could feel the truth of those words: *Trust is invisible.*

It was invisible, yes, but it could not be ignored.

"Mr. Piasky."

Piasky trembled when Lawrence spoke, and a few drops of sweat fell from his chin.

If the wolf bones were real and not a fairy tale, then helping Lawrence would be a good way for Piasky to get promoted. But if they were the ravings of a mad traveling merchant and Piasky let himself believe in them, they would be his undoing.

Heaven or hell—if their sum was zero, then the only thing to be gained by getting involved was the thrill of the gamble. When the price of failure was ruin, anyone would hesitate, given enough time to do so.

And hesitation often gave rise to fear.

"...I just...I simply can't..." Piasky agonizingly forced the words from his mouth, even as he wondered if what Lawrence had said was true.

He was escaping!

Lawrence had no choice but to block his path.

"What if—" said Lawrence with a voice as sharp as a needle, but then he hesitated. If he said what he was about to say, there would be no turning back from the path it would lead them down. Lawrence swallowed and continued, "What if I told you the king was taking action?"

"Wha... huh? What—what sort of...?"

"A tax."

He had said it.

Piasky's face went blank, and he stared at Lawrence. But unlike his dumbfounded face, his mind was surely calculating at unbelievable speeds.

Piasky stood swiftly from the chair. But Lawrence would not let him escape. "What good will it do to tell them now?"

As he shook his arm to try to free it from Lawrence's grasp, it was obvious where Piasky was headed.

No matter the group, loyalty made its members into dogs. It was natural to assume Piasky was running to deliver the crucial information to his betters.

"What good—? I must inform them immediately!"

"Inform them? And then make a plan?"

"That has nothing to do with you!"

"Even though you long ago lost your hand to play?"

"...!"

Piasky's resistance ceased. The pained look on his face showed he knew Lawrence was right.

"Please calm yourself. Even if you did tell the alliance of this, you would only be needlessly worrying them. If a new tax comes, the abbey will be ruined. And when that happens, they'll choose between falling to their knees before the king and begging for mercy or dying valiantly. But if someone reveals that the abbey

has a pagan item like the wolf bones, what do you suppose the abbey will conclude?"

The abbey could not escape its own land, and the land could not escape secular authority. So what would happen if in order to pay taxes, it asked for help from the Ruvik Alliance, which was openly working against the government?

The king would call it treason and send in the military.

And even if it came to that, the abbey still had a final hope—it was still a part of the Church. But if the truth of the wolf bones was revealed, that last hope would be taken hostage.

If a clergyman were asked which choice was the worst for the king or the pope, like anyone affiliated with the Church, he would answer the latter.

And that would be the moment that would give the alliance a chance to strike.

"Mr. Piasky, the time left to us is dwindling, and we will only have a single opportunity. Before all descends into chaos, we must put this attractively mad idea to the powers that be. And even if we don't have their agreement, we'll have their attention, so when chaos does fall, we'll be easier to notice. After all, a drowning man will reach for whatever's nearest. I'm optimistic enough to think this will succeed. You see—"

Lawrence moved around the table and stood before Piasky.

"—I'm quite certain the story of the wolf bones is true."

Piasky's eyes fixed upon Lawrence. He was not glaring—it was as his gaze had been nailed there.

His breathing was ragged, and his shoulders rose and fell violently.

"Mr. Piasky."

Piasky closed his eyes. It looked like a gesture of defeat, as if Piasky was telling Lawrence to do whatever he wanted, but as his eyes closed, his mouth opened and he spoke.

"What proof do you have that this tax is real?"

He had taken the bait. But the hook was not yet fully set.

Suppressing his urge to pounce, Lawrence responded slowly. "I'm staying with the shepherds at the moment. When something gets dropped outside, I can be the first one to see it."

Piasky shut his eyes tightly and took a deep breath through his nose. He was probably trying to cool his head. Those gestures alone were all the proof Lawrence needed to know his words were having the desired effect.

"When did this happen?" Piasky asked.

"Late last night. That's one of the reasons I couldn't sleep."

Piasky gritted his teeth with such force that Lawrence felt sure he could hear the grinding. If the taxation were real, the town would instantly turn into a stick-poked hornet's nest as soon as the news was delivered. And at that point, no further proposals would be heard.

In other words, there would no longer be anything anyone could do.

Lawrence was sure that Piasky knew that much, so he did not say anything further. A merchant could wait all night for a scale to tip if it would win him profit.

There in the silence peculiar to snowfall, time passed.

Sweat beaded on Lawrence's brow.

Piasky slowly opened his eyes and spoke. "Fifteen hundred pieces."

"Huh?"

"Fifteen hundred pieces of *lumione* gold. How much volume did that come to?"

Lawrence relaxed his tense expression in spite of himself, but not because he thought Piasky's question was foolish. It was the proof that they had made a contract.

"I won't let you regret this," said Lawrence.

Piasky burst out laughing at this, looking upward momentarily as though in prayer, then wiping his sweat-soaked face with both palms. "Fifteen hundred pieces of gold. I'd like to see that much just once in my life."

Lawrence extended his hand. He could not help saying it. "You will. If all goes well."

"I'd best hope so!"

The first barrier had been passed.

CHAPTER FIVE



Once they had shaken hands, Piasky was quick to take action.

Circumstances allowing, his job was collecting people from disparate villages and towns and bringing them together into a single group, so he would have a better mind than Lawrence for knowing how to motivate a group from within that group.

But he did not do anything as foolish as sprinting off to tell his masters that the story of the wolf bones was true. Piasky's first statement was that they needed allies.

"It needs to be someone curious but who can be trusted with a secret. Someone quick-witted but with time to spare, the kind of person you'd seek out even if they weren't the head of a great trading company—and perhaps God is with us, because there are many such people in the town right now."

If they brought the story of the wolf bones to the alliance leadership without first doing a thorough investigation, they would be dismissed as mad and shown the door.

And such an investigation could not be completed without trusted allies.

"Can I count on you to find them, then?"

"Yes. We'll take a day or two to go over all the records again.

Now that we know there's something to find, it shouldn't be hard to find it." Piasky's bold smile made him seem all the more trustworthy.

"That's encouraging."

"I'd like to finish the early preparation before the blizzard ends. We'll only be able to get others to listen to us if they have time to spare. And we'll need... *something*... persuasive enough to bring them over."

Without Lawrence along, it would be nigh impossible for Piasky to persuasively sell the wolf bones' story, because if there had been any obvious traces of them in the abbey's records, they would have been found already.

"I won't let you down on that count. Leave it to me."

Piasky nodded. "Incidentally...," he continued.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to talk about how we'll divide the profit."

A merchant's goal was always profit. Whenever the profit shares were not discussed, it was usually because his true goal was something else.

Piasky's gaze was fixed unflinchingly on Lawrence. Lawrence looked elsewhere as he replied.

"If things go well, I don't think we'll make an amount small enough the division will be worth talking about."

"..." Piasky smiled admiringly, as though apologizing for having doubted Lawrence. "I can't say I don't sometimes wish I were in the simple business of buying and selling something."

The only reason to be constantly suspicious of one's trading partners is if the business itself was a frustratingly complicated one.

"I've often wished I could trade only for myself," said Lawrence in response to Piasky's self-deprecating admission.

"Would that be good or bad?"

Lawrence straightened his collar and found himself glancing around for Holo as Piasky opened the door for him.

"At the very least, it wouldn't be so tiresome."

Piasky grinned and cocked his head, sighing with sympathy. "Quite. That's where disasters start."

Had they been drinking, they would have patted each other on the back—but merchants are a bit more reserved than that, so they only exchanged a glance.

"We'll arm ourselves with parchment and ink. And what about you, Mr. Lawrence?"

"My testimony. And some parchment as well."

Insisting that he had physical proof was a dangerous risk, given that he was without allies in this isolated place. There was a good possibility said proof would be taken from him by force.

But had he been in Piasky's place, he was quite sure that testimony alone would have left him feeling rather uneasy. Having weighed the two options against each other, Lawrence had spoken, and it seemed to have been the right choice.

Piasky's face relaxed in relief. "In any case, the whole of my bet will be on you, Mr. Lawrence."

"I'm well aware of what that means."

"I'll go and find some allies, then. What will you do next, Mr. Lawrence?"

"I need to meet with my companions. The situation being what it is, the word of those whose hands are hidden under their robes may be more trustworthy than the word of those whose hands are stained with ink."

Piasky nodded and opened the door. "I'll be hoping for the blizzard to continue a while," he said, "as it seems our time may be quite limited."

If their negotiations were not completed before either the alliance or the abbey heard of the tax decree, their lives would

become much more difficult. Though the weather seemed unlikely to change for the moment, a messenger with a royal notice in his breast pocket might forge undauntedly through it nonetheless.

"Please come directly to my office next time. May I...call on you in your lodgings, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Certainly. I'll be counting on you."

They exchanged a handshake and then became strangers.

When Lawrence ventured back out into the snow, he found that the footprints he had left not long before were vanishing, even as he followed them back to the shepherds' dormitory. He wondered if his actions for others would fade with time, just as his footprints had. Even if he had a body as huge as Holo's, his footprints would still vanish into the past, given long enough.

Even a homeland was not eternal—not even if it was filled with comrades, not even if it gave the illusion of permanence.

But when one's footprints disappeared, one simply kept walking. The same was true for homes.

This was another reason for Lawrence to come to Huskins's aid. It was possible to create a new home. When danger came, friends were there to help. The world was not necessarily a cruel or hopeless place—he would be able to say these things to Holo.

When he returned to the dormitory, he found Huskins and Holo sitting across from each other with the hearth between them, talking quietly. More precisely, it seemed as though Huskins was talking of the past while Holo quietly listened.

"For the moment, it seems our first bait has been taken."

Huskins nodded deeply and silently, expressing his thanks, though unable to bow.

"I'm going to sleep a bit. Piasky's capable friends will be poring over the abbey records, so I'm sure they'll find something amiss soon enough."

The difficulty would be in what came after convincing the alliance that the wolf bones existed. Once they knew the bones had to be there, the alliance would start mightily pressing their own demands.

Just how hard they pressed would depend on how much they believed.

Lawrence was not at all confident in his ability to keep hold of the reins. He was not as big as a horse or bull.

If he did not sleep soon, his stamina was going to fail him.

Holo had not been able to meet Lawrence's eyes, perhaps owing to Huskins's presence, but as he passed by her, their hands lightly touched.

Entering the next room, Lawrence found Col sleeping in the bed. While he had to admit it was nice that the bed would not be as shiveringly cold as it would have been otherwise, something was still missing.

Lawrence grinned wryly as he pulled the blanket over himself.

The windows were closed and snow clogged their cracks, so it was hard to tell what time it was. When Lawrence awoke, he guessed it was past midday. A strange feeling of unease overrode his drowsiness.

It was too quiet.

He sat up immediately and rose from the bed to open a window. Snow caked to the shutter and walls fell with an audible *thump*, and leaving the window open let a cold wind in.

It was so frigid it hurt his face; the world outside was white.

The wind, though, had largely calmed, and while snow was still falling, it hardly qualified as a blizzard.

The special silence of a snowy landscape had returned profoundly enough that Lawrence thought he could hear his ears ringing.

Perhaps it was the quiet itself that had woken him; silence often roused him more effectively than noise did—because silence always accompanied inauspicious developments.

"...Just you, eh?" When Lawrence went into the room with the hearth, he found Holo there, tending the fire alone.

"I was trying to decide whether to wake you or not."

"Did you feel bad for me, seeing how tired I'd been?"

As Huskins was gone, Lawrence sat next to Holo.

Holo's reply was curt as she prodded the embers with an iron poker. "Your face was so foolish I quite lost the desire to rouse you."

"Did something happen?" Something must have, given that the exhausted Huskins was out—to say nothing of Col's absence. And the blizzard that had temporarily stopped time had itself ceased.

Holo put the poker down and leaned against Lawrence. "When the snow began to let up, some men from the abbey came. The messenger that was supposed to arrive today or tomorrow hasn't arrived yet, and they wanted to know if the shepherds know anything of it."

"What did Mr. Huskins tell them?"

"The dead man he found had definitely been the messenger they sought, he said, and he'd feign ignorance for the time being. The messenger was far enough away that no ordinary shepherd is likely to find him, he said. Young Col went along with him."

Given that, a different messenger bearing the same message would, at the earliest, arrive the next day or the day after that.

"What shall we do?"

"Right now all we can do is wait. Once Piasky finds something that we can use as proof, we'll try to get an audience with the alliance authorities."

"Mm..."

At Holo's listless response, Lawrence glanced from her profile to her tail, at which point she grabbed his ear.

"Could you just once make a decision without checking on my tail, hmm?"

"O-one always needs proof before taking major action!"

"Fool." Holo released his ear with deliberate force and then looked away sullenly.

She had pulled on his ear with some strength, and it still stung—but it let Lawrence know just how irritated she actually was. A maiden's heart was a subtle thing—or perhaps a beast's heart. She probably felt that when her ears and tail were checked to divine her true feelings, whatever answer she gave with her mouth would be ignored.

"Of course, you'll have a role to play as well," said Lawrence, at which Holo looked up, her ears pricking to attention.

She was so easy to read he wanted to pat her on the head.

Or at least that was what he thought until Holo's reply reached him.

"Do you want me to chew those ears right off your head?"

Lawrence was quite fond of his own ears, so he hastened to shake his head. "The alliance is a large organization. The members that are here in this town now are only a part of it. I imagine the real leaders are somewhere nice and warm, far from all this snow. But the reality remains the same—to spur a large group to action, you need persuasion equal to the scale. Sometimes something beyond mere facts and proof is needed."

Holo looked up at him, exceedingly dubious. She was probably being so intentionally sulky because she knew how much he liked it.

"I get very nervous when I have to stand up before a group, but you're a natural actress," he said, addressing her dubiousness.

Holo sniffed as though her fun had been ruined, but her tail swished happily nonetheless, betraying her good spirits.

"For knowledge we have Col. I'll take care of putting it into practice."

"And what of me?" Holo asked, but Lawrence had difficulty finding the words.

"Atmosphere."

Holo burst out laughing as though she could not help it and giggled there for a while and then sighed as she clung to Lawrence's arm.

"'Tis true, I'm always the one who creates the atmosphere. And you're the one who always ruins it," she said, her mouth very close to his ear.

"..." Lawrence of course had many things he wanted to say, but he cleared this throat and continued, "Atmosphere and mood are very important since displaying concrete proof is impossible. It's very important to make them think this bet is one worth taking. All joking aside..." He faced Holo before finishing. "It will determine success or failure."

He was met by the red-amber pupils of her big, round eyes.

Despite having witnessed so much of the world, she still had the wide, innocent eyes of a young girl.

They blinked once. And in a moment, her mood completely changed.

"You may rely on me. The old man told me something, you see."

"What did he say?"

"He said that upon our success, he'll give me the fattest sheep of the year."

It was just the sort of promise Lawrence would expect from a wise, old sheep spirit that disguised himself as a human, ate mutton, and worked hard both in the shadows and in the open to create a second home.

Holo must have been speechless when the clever offer was put to her. And she must have realized that she had to help him.

"He told me much of his troubles—in creating a new home and in protecting it."

Her profile showed a mix of quiet anger and seriousness. Holo had a strong sense of honor and could be surprisingly humble.

"Was it useful?"

Holo's tail swished audibly. "... Aye."

"I see."

If Holo had in that moment opened her mouth and asked him to make her a home like Huskins had made for himself, Lawrence would not have been able to answer in the affirmative.

Both of them understood this, but as neither of them really trusted the other to completely avoid the topic, parts of their conversation was awkward.

Lawrence could tell that Holo was reassured, though. He put his arm around her shoulders and was about to pull her closer when—

"Now, then," she said, grabbing his hand. "Time is running short."

"..."

"Come now, don't make such a face. Or did you want to flail about again?"

Past her mischievous smile, Lawrence heard the quiet sound of a staff and footsteps. Col and Huskins must have returned.

Holo stood and stretched. Her joints cracked and her tail fur puffed out pleasantly. Lawrence only had a moment to enjoy gazing at her, though. Not because she pinched his cheek for staring at her tail, but because she was covering it and her ears up.

There was no need to hide them from Huskins now.

Which meant that Holo's ears had caught the same sound that Lawrence heard, but that she could tell it was not Col and Huskins.

Surely not—

Lawrence's hair stood on end, and even though he knew it was pointless, his hand went to his breast where the royal decree that Huskins had recovered from the dead messenger still was.

Even if he tossed the sheepskin parchment into the fire, it would not burn immediately the way paper would. Holo looked at him, shocked, as though wondering what was the matter.

Lawrence could only pray to God.

"Excuse us." It was a quiet voice and one that would brook no argument. Its owner was a man wearing a robe—different from Holo's—who spoke as though used to having his commands obeyed.

Huskins stood between the two men.

"You'll have to excuse us for a moment. You there—" said the older one.

"Yes!" The younger monk entered the room and looked around, immediately reaching for Huskins's belongings. Huskins watched calmly, his ascetic expression completely hiding any emotions.

The problem was Col, who lacked both experience and beard.

Lawrence met his eyes and could tell Col might start trembling in fear at any moment.

"A traveling merchant, are you?" the older, fatter monk asked, still standing in the doorway. Perhaps he considered a shepherd's home to be unclean.

"That's right. We're staying here as we couldn't find a room elsewhere."

"I see. So you're with the Ruviks?"

"No. I'm attached to the Rowen Trade Guild."

"Hn." The monk nodded and sniffed. It was possible that the utterance was merely the sound of air being expelled by the fatty flesh around his neck as he nodded; in any case, the impression was not a good one.

"Might I ask what the matter is?"

The atmosphere was too tense for idle chatter. The monk behind Lawrence was still roughly rummaging through bags, blankets, and firewood, after all.

There were few possibilities. First and foremost, Huskins was under suspicion of having encountered a messenger while out searching for lost sheep. No doubt they thought he had gotten greedy and stolen something. Such occurrences were quite common.

"Oh, nothing too out of the ordinary... You said you were in the Rowen Trade Guild?"

Lawrence had no choice but to answer. "Yes."

"I don't recall that our abbey has had any dealings with that organization."

If he panicked here, he would have no cause to complain when Holo buried her foot in his backside later.

"True. We're not actually here on business."

"Oh?" said the monk, narrowing his eyes.

"The little lamb there and I have come to the grand Brondel Abbey in the hopes of receiving its blessings."

"... You're on pilgrimage?"

"Yes."

It had been quite some time since the abbey had received pilgrims. It strained belief that a merchant would come here with a young nun and a boy on pilgrimage.

The monk smiled, but not with his eyes. "Speaking of Rowen, I seem to recall hearing that name across the strait. There are some famous churches and abbeys over there, are there not? St. Liebert Abbey, La Kieak Abbey, the Church of Gibralta. Or Ruvinheigen."

Given the other monk ransacking the dormitory behind them, the questions were an obvious interrogation.

"We heard tell of a holy relic."

"A holy relic," the monk repeated flatly.

"Yes. I heard that this place has a love of sheep as well as of God. It seemed perhaps better suited than the other places you just named, to a merchant like myself."

The monk chuckled in reply to the levity, but his gaze remained fixed on Lawrence. The other monk moved to the next room.

Lawrence's belongings were there, but like most merchants, he had a habit of keeping dangerous items on his person. They could turn the room upside down, and he would still have nothing to fear.

"I see... Well, you seem a well-traveled merchant. God's blessings be upon you!"

The monk was surely being sarcastic, but Lawrence nodded meekly anyway.

"Marco!" the older monk called out, and the younger one came rushing out of the room with the bed, like a dog called by its master.

These monks hardly appeared like they spent their days quietly praying; they seemed more like well-drilled mercenaries.

"Did you find anything?"

"Nothing."

"I see."

Lawrence wondered if the monks were openly having this conversation in front of him, Col, and Holo in order to intimidate them. Or perhaps they were just trying to save a bit of face, having found nothing.

In any case, the danger seemed to have passed.

Or so Lawrence thought.

"The cuckoo lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. Search these two."

A former merchant—but by the time Lawrence realized the older monk's true nature, it was too late.

The monk called Marco looked back and forth between Lawrence and Holo, a lecherous look passing across his face. He pushed past Lawrence and approached Holo.

"In God's name, please endure this." His words were polite, but that only made him seem more snakelike.

Under Holo's robe was her tail, and beneath her hood were her wolf ears. Her face was as serene as a saint faced with martyrdom, but Lawrence did not feel so calm.

Marco should have checked her sleeves first, but he went straight down from her shoulders along the line of her figure. Holo flinched away when his hands reached her chest.

"What's this?" he said. His notice of the pouch of wheat that hung from her neck made it clear what sort of method his search was using. "Wheat?"

"It's a charm...," Holo answered in a tremulous voice no bigger than a fly's, which brought a sadistically obscene smile to Marco's face. Lawrence felt his hands closing into fists but held himself back.

If Holo could endure this, he would also endure this, lest all their effort be for naught.

As his hand continued their slide down Holo's flanks, the difference in their heights forced Marco to crouch down. If he moved his hands around behind her, her tail would be right there.

Would Holo be able to fool him?

The only thing that let Lawrence restrain his anger was that uncertainty.

Then, as Marco's hands began to curve around Holo's waist—

"Wah...uuh..."

A small sob was heard. Holo's face was downcast as Marco shamelessly stroked her waist. He looked up and clicked his tongue.

Tears fell from Holo's eyes. She held the pouch of wheat as though clinging to it.

Seeming to decide that this amusement was over, Marco removed his hands from Holo, hastily checking her sleeves before standing up.

"God has proven your innocence."

Holo nodded meekly.

Lawrence was sure she was not really crying, but she had done a magnificent job of faking it. But this relief did not last long.

With Holo searched, he would of course be next.

"If you'll excuse me." The look in Marco's eyes was different now. He had no reason to hold back when searching Lawrence, and Lawrence was the more suspicious party.

He had several letters in his breast pocket. If the parchment with the notice of taxation on it were found, all would be lost.

If only he had a chance to rid himself of it.

The moment Marco's hand reached out to Lawrence, Lawrence met Holo's eyes.

"Look out!" Lawrence shouted, pushing past Marco to reach Holo's side. When he had exchanged the look with her, Holo had nodded minutely, then tearfully clutched the pouch as though praying to God, then wobbled unsteadily, her nerves seemingly causing her to faint—and she started to fall in the direction of the hearth.

Lawrence threw his arms around her, and they both tumbled to the floor. They had bought themselves another moment.

But what to do next? What could be done? Lawrence thought frantically as he held Holo in his arms.

Footsteps approached, and someone stood immediately behind him. He would not be able to deceive them for much longer.

"Is she hurt?" Marco had the gall to ask, as though he were concerned.

But of course Lawrence could not allow himself anger. "She's

safe," said Lawrence, sitting up. Holo was feigning unconsciousness, her eyes closed.

The footsteps behind him had been Col. He helped Lawrence prop Holo up.

"We'll take her to the other room."

With Col's help, Lawrence carried Holo to the next room and laid her on the bed. Marco watched them carefully the entire time, and there was no opportunity for Lawrence to remove the letter and hide it elsewhere.

Lawrence's stomach churned as he frantically tried to think of what to do.

"Are you finished?" Marco asked pitilessly, and Lawrence had no choice but to obey, sheep-like.

"Right, take off your coat."

Lawrence sluggishly removed his coat and handed it to Marco.

Marco shook it, checked the pockets, and searched the lining for anything that might be hidden there. He was not an amateur at this.

"Next."

Dear God! Lawrence cried out in his heart, trying to keep his composure as he removed the article that contained the letter, and then—

"All right." Marco finished searching the piece the same way and then returned it to Lawrence. "God has revealed the truth." With those words he turned to face the older monk with his results.

"We're sorry to have troubled you. God will surely reward the faith you have shown in your pilgrimage."

With those hollow words, the two monks left. Huskins saw them off from the hallway and then returned, and Col closed the door behind him.

All three of them heaved a sigh of relief.



"I honestly never noticed," said Lawrence to a grinning Holo as he approached her room and leaned against the doorframe.

"So you thought I was just bawling the whole time? Funny—" Holo produced the letters from her own breast pocket and fanned them through the air as she approached Lawrence. "I was sure you'd noticed."

That had been the reason Holo had grasped her wheat pouch and kept her hands at her chest as though pretending to pray. Lawrence gave a strained smile; as to whether or not it had been Holo's plan, if he had not met her eye in that instant, there was no telling what might have happened. The realization caused another wave of fear to hit him.

"Ah, well, we've gotten away with it so I suppose it hardly matters. And I got to see your foolish face, too."

Holo nudged his chest, and surprisingly it was Huskins who laughed faintly. It sounded like a cough as he sat down by the hearth.

"Apologies," he said. The short apology was only more embarrassing.

Holo did not seem to mind, but Lawrence reddened.

"Still, the abbey may now send men out to meet the messengers." Only when Huskins returned to the topic at hand was Lawrence able to regain his composure.

"Will they return by tomorrow?"

"There's quite a distance involved, and the sun will soon be setting. It will be tomorrow evening or possibly the day after... so what say you? Will things go well?"

"I cannot guarantee that. But I have faith in the man I've asked to help."

"I see... Still..." Lawrence was about to ask what Huskins was referring to, but Huskins shook his head and looked down, continuing on. "I shouldn't have doubted you. Humans are very

clever. I just didn't want to admit it out of pride. Or envy," said Huskins amusedly.

Just then, the sound of footsteps reached Lawrence's ears—strong footsteps, too, that were heading directly their way in something of a hurry.

Lawrence had often held his breath and listened closely to the footsteps of bandits or wolves, so he could generally tell whether they were friend or foe. And this was a friend.

There was a knock at the door, and when Col opened it, Piasky was there.

"Mr. Lawrence." His cheeks were rosy like a child's. "I found it."

Lawrence exchanged a look with Holo and Col, and standing, he looked at Huskins.

But Huskins only pointed to the staff next to him and shook his head, as if to say, "I've asked for your help, so I trust you."

Lawrence nodded and spoke to Piasky. "May I bring my companions?"

"I don't mind. Quite the contrary, please do. Did I see monks from the abbey here a moment ago?"

"Yes. They were extremely unpleasant."

Piasky's smile had a childlike innocence. "Were they? Still, I assume from your saying so that the outcome was pleasant. I'm encouraged that they were already here. Or maybe the opposite of that." As Lawrence and his companions started to walk, Piasky continued, "If we're going to strike, we must do it now."

The sun was about to set.

As they went outside, the snow had completely ceased to fall.

Piasky's office was packed with eccentric merchants.

It did not seem to be because of a lack of trading partners, but some of them had huge beards, and one had grown his hair out like some vain knight.

Following Piasky, Lawrence brought Holo and Col into the room, where a light whistle greeted them.

"The two monks that visited you are especially hated over at the alliance inn," Piasky explained over his shoulder to Lawrence, resting his hand on a desk in the corner of the room. "Constantly asking whether their messengers have arrived or whether we've gotten their letters. They've even tried to go through our things. I suppose that goes to show how desperate they are. The abbey must be worried that if the king plans to decree a tax, he'll be doing it soon."

"I see. So they think danger is imminent."

Piasky briefly looked down to indicate agreement, a gesture that made Lawrence feel as though they were mutually communicating their thoughts in a dark place where no sound could be made.

"So, what have you found?"

"Since we were suspicious this time, it wasn't difficult. When something expensive is purchased after all, the only way to hide it is with an equally expensive sale. However, this is only a supposition—it only looks as though we've found it. We can't be certain."

Confirming Piasky's suspicions about what was written in the ledger would require Lawrence's help.

"In particular, their regular expenditures are less distinct and easier to hide in. Trying to hide a onetime cost is far more conspicuous. Concretely speaking, such things are robes and such for the monks, building materials, masonry costs, and spices for the periodic welcome banquets they have."

As he spoke, Piasky pulled out the relevant sections and handed them to Lawrence.

Lawrence looked them over and had to admit that he could not follow them. They seemed like perfectly unremarkable ledgers.

"Our advantage is in having so many merchants. With so many eyes and ears, we can bring together information from places separated by great distances. The spice, saffron, came via two separate towns, and it was the key."

"Meaning?"

"When the purchase was made, saffron wasn't the only good to arrive in the town. A comrade of mine happened to be there at the time, you see. The ship it was on was delayed by a storm. The royal merchants handling import and export knew what the monastery's goal was and managed to turn it to their advantage. If they were going to pay money for empty crates, it could be used to cover a bigger expenditure somewhere. But that wound up being their undoing."

Once a single lie was discovered, all lies could be seen.

Simply by discovering that a shipment had been concealed in an overpayment, all that was necessary was applying some clever thinking.

"The expenditure for those items was above market value. Either that or the crates really were empty. There were items there that even we didn't understand. Still—"

"—That's more than enough," Lawrence finished, returning the parchment to Piasky. "So, tonight?"

"If the main abbey is going to the trouble of sending out monks, they must be in a desperate state. And they may have even dispatched shepherds out to go meet the messengers."

Huskins had said as much.

Piasky's expression was strained. "If you're ready, Mr. Lawrence, the men in charge are all gathered."

Lawrence looked at Holo and Col, who flanked him. The two of them slowly nodded. "That is fine."

"Well, then," Piasky said, straightening up from the desk on which he had been leaning. "Let us go."

* * *

Entering the alliance inn, the atmosphere had changed.

A strange heat suffused it, as though too many logs had been thrown in the fireplace. Perhaps it was an aftereffect of those two monks coming to cause trouble. Anytime monks acted so high-and-mighty, even the sleepiest merchant would smell blood, like a wolf—because to act so rashly spoke of injury and weakness.

Given that the town was filled with either those looking for the abbey's wound—all the better to seize it in their jaws—or those simply hoping to see the show, the hot atmosphere was not surprising.

So when Piasky led Lawrence and his companions into the room, the gazes of all present fell upon them.

An outsider merchant, a girl dressed as a nun, and a small boy appearing as an afterthought—all were led by Piasky into the inn and up the stairs, and as they went, all present in the inn couldn't help but wonder: Had they found something?

The jealous gazes felt like frostbite. Lawrence itched under them; there was no telling how badly Holo was affected. And it was hardly surprising that Col did not dare look up.

"Here we are." Piasky stopped in front of a room in the very center of the third floor. The young merchant straightened his collar and then knocked. "Excuse us."

Entering the room, the scents of honey and milk mingled with spices reached Lawrence's nose.

It was the smell of men who insisted that food without spices like pepper and saffron was not food for humans at all.

Sitting around the large round table in the middle of the spacious room were four middle-aged men. Each of them had the air of a man who owned his own large shop, and they all looked quite tired of life in this snowbound abbey.

However, that not a single one of them so much as glanced toward Piasky or Lawrence had nothing to do with that.

"I, Lag Piasky, humbly approach."

"There's no time. Spare us your pleasantries." A stocky, well-fed man whose hair curled around his ears gestured for Piasky to stop, then narrowed his eyes and looked at Lawrence. "So you're from Rowen, eh?"

"Yes."

"Hmm." The man asked what he wanted answered but gave no reply himself. The other men at the table sat there watching Lawrence, not so much as reaching for their drinks.

"May I speak?" said Piasky, undaunted, at which the man raised his hand as though telling him to go on. "Thank you for sparing us some of your time to hear us out. First, this—" he said, producing a sheaf of parchment from under his arm, whereupon a servant standing against the wall came to receive it.

It was placed like a plate of so much bread on the round table, whereupon each man reached lazily out to take a parchment, their eyes narrowing as they glanced over the characters.

"Copies of their ledger, eh? What of it?" said another man, this one thin and nervous-looking, sounding already bored. His eyes were sunken, and the wrinkles around them looked almost scaly.

The other men had a similar affect, and after giving the parchments a look, they tossed them back on the table.

"There was a payment for empty crates. We also discovered payments for multiple items at higher than market value."

The four men did not bother meeting each other's gaze. One of them spoke up to Piasky, evidently acting as the representative of their consensus. "That's not such a rare occurrence from places unable to escape the yoke of taxation."

"Yes, of course."

"So what is the meaning of showing us this now?"

Piasky took a breath, pierced by the man's gaze. Now it was Lawrence's job to speak.

"We believe the abbey is trying to hide not its earnings, but its expenditures."

The four men's gazes all fixed on the outsider who spoke up—though it was too early to tell whether out of interest or anger.

"Expenditures?"

"Yes," Lawrence answered, whereupon another man spoke.

"You said you were from Rowen. Do you speak for Lord Goldens?"

That was the name of the man who controlled the Rowen Trade Guild from a seat at his own round table. He was far, far above Lawrence, possibly even a match for the men sitting around this table.

"No, I do not."

"So, who then?" Perhaps suspicious of another organization trying to stick its nose in, the man's tone was extremely harsh. Theirs was the banner of the moon and shield. No guildsman would be allowed to defy that banner.

"Allow me to correct myself. I am a stray traveling merchant."

"And how are we to believe that?"

Of course.

"Pardon me," said Lawrence, reaching for the dagger at his waist. He pulled it from its sheath and unhesitatingly put its tip to the palm of his left hand. "If you'll give me parchment, I'll be happy to sign in blood."

If a traveling merchant left his guild, he would have nowhere to go.

Three of the four men turned away in immediate disdain.

"You there." The fourth gestured with a jerk of his chin to the servant standing against the wall, who immediately left the room. Perhaps he had been sent to fetch a bandage.

"Sometimes you must take risks while you're young enough to do so. I'll listen to your tale out of respect for your name, not Rowen's."

If Lawrence had not smiled, he would have been lying. "My name is Kraft Lawrence."

When the servant returned with the bandage, Holo snatched Lawrence's hand away and began wrapping it, and he knew she would not have done so unless she was giving his performance high marks.

"Kraft Lawrence, what have you and our own Lag Piasky concluded? You said the abbey is hiding its own expenditures. As far as paying for empty crates or paying above market value, these things are not so unusual in the context of paying royal taxation. It's not worth any special attention."

"True, if they were merely evading taxation."

"And what else might they be hiding?"

Having finished wrapping his hand, Holo lightly patted it, as if encouraging him. Heartened, he replied further.

"The purchase of an expensive item. Something whose existence had to be kept a secret."

The four men shared a brief glance. "An item? What sort of item would that be?"

Their interest had been piqued.

Lawrence clenched his left hand now that Holo had wrapped it in bandages. "The bones of a wolf. The remains of a creature known as a god by the pagans that infest the northlands."

He had said it.

Lawrence took a breath. If he did not press the issue, his words would be dismissed as a joke.

"This is no baseless rumor. Across the strait is the port town of Kerube, where the Jean Company runs a shop. I suspect you may have already heard of this, but not long ago there was a great clamor about a narwhal and into that whirlpool the Jean Company put fifteen hundred *lumione*."

The four men were silent.

Lawrence took another breath and continued.

"They had received backing from the Debau Company in the town of Lesko, up the Roef River, a tributary of the Roam River. Their aim was nothing less than the purchase of those same wolf bones."

Lawrence's only worry was that he was speaking too quickly. Save that, he was confident.

He was sure that the higher-ups of the Ruvik Alliance had heard tell of the rumors surrounding the wolf bones, and they were no doubt aware of the Debau Company, who controlled the mines of the north.

Even if they did not immediately believe him, they would have to admit Lawrence was including too much detail for his tale to be simply fabricated. Of that much, he was sure.

"So what say you to this?"

But there was no response forthcoming. The room was suffused with slackness that felt almost tired.

Piasky looked at him. Was there nothing else to say? If they could not convince these men, no further progress was possible.

Lawrence was about to nervously open his mouth, but then he was interrupted—by Holo.

"If you have any thoughts, please tell us."

All four of them looked at Holo, shocked. But the wisewolf was undaunted.

"God has told us never to pretend disinterest."

Only a jester or a plain fool would make a joke in a place like this. The four men sitting around the table were not falsely prideful—their confidence was entirely warranted.

But that only held true in the secular world, and there was a merciless fact that applied to the current situation. This was an abbey, and monks here prayed to a being above even creatures like Holo and Huskins—the one true God!

"Miss... no, excuse me, devout sister who lives by her daily prayers—just what do you mean?"

"God is a being whose powers far outstrip those of man. Though my eyes are hidden by the hood I wear and though my head is always bowed, by relying on God's power, it is mere child's play to see through all of this."

Strangeness had its own power.

Even the overpowering aura that emanated invisibly from the four sitting at the table came not just from Lawrence and Piasky's respect, but also their own belief in their value.

For one to simply not acknowledge that, she was either a stunted fool or—or someone who lived by a different philosophy entirely.

"Well... thank you for your thoughts, sister."

When a man of power was faced with a beardless lad who spoke impudently, it was simple enough to put him back in his place with a harsh word or two. But when it was a girl, harsh words could make one look worse.

A mere girl needed to be dealt with using an indulgent smile and a patronizing chuckle before setting her in the corner like a flower in a vase.

Lawrence himself had until recently labored under such misapprehensions, but he could not let himself laugh at these men who were now trapped in the same place with their stiff smiles.

"So, shall I ask again, then?"

Four rigid faces reddened, and as they were all quite pale to begin with, it was all the more noticeable.

They were trapped between their stature, common sense, and their own dignity.

Even a poor blanket would warm when rubbed.

Was Holo planning to rile them up and then wait until they exploded before beating them down and forcing them to listen?



That would work in many situations, and if it worked here, it would have been quite the feat.

But this was no child's quarrel. Lawrence was about to speak up when—

"No," said one of the red-faced men through tightly drawn lips. "That's quite all right."

He raised his right hand to about shoulder height, whereupon the servant stationed against the wall quickly handed him a white kerchief.

After a quick blow of his nose, his face almost magically regained its former color. "That will be quite all right. I was simply reminded of something from twenty-two years ago."

Another man sitting around the table raised an eyebrow.

"It reminded me of my wife when she and her dowry joined my house. Logic is not the only path to truth."

A thick rumble reached Lawrence's ears, and he realized it was the four men laughing.

"And indeed, common business decisions often surpass mere logic. Gentlemen," he said as though making a proclamation at a round table meeting. "May I ask the final question?"

"No objections," said the other three men after reaching a consensus.

The man turned his gaze to Lawrence. "Regarding all of this, Kraft Lawrence, I would ask you one thing."

"Yes?" His hands were moist with blood and sweat.

"Pray tell, just what is it that you've discovered that gives you such confidence in this story?"

Lawrence immediately reached into his breast pocket and produced a single letter. It was the trump card that showed the story of the wolf bones was no mere fairy tale.

There in his hand were the signatures of Kieman and Eve, both

names well-known across the Strait of Winfiel. Eve was even a former noblewoman of this land.

He had those signatures and Eve's word that she had heard of the abbey purchasing the wolf bones. And to wrap all that up, he had a name.

"This letter was given to me by Fleur von Eiterzental Mariel Bolan."

A long name was the proof of nobility but only to those who could understand what meaning it held.

The eyebrows of two of the men at the table rose, and Lawrence looked to the sheet of parchment that lay there on the table.

Knowing what sort of merchant Eve was was common knowledge for anyone doing business in Winfiel. And here was a traveling merchant to whom she had given her secret full name.

Two of the men at the table shared a look, and then three of them nodded slightly.

The moment Lawrence dared to think he had won—

"Anything else?"

"—?" Lawrence nearly repeated the question back but managed to stop himself with a short cough.

He cleared his throat several times before gesturing toward the table with his empty hand to pardon himself, all of which were unconscious habits drilled into him over years of negotiations.

Lawrence's mind was like a blank white sheet of paper.

"Anything else?" the most important-seeming man at the table had asked.

Was this not enough?

Lawrence had played his trump card—and in the best possible moment, under the best possible circumstances. If this was not enough, then there was nothing else he could do.

Keen gazes regarded him from the round table.

"The Wolf and the Keen Eye—it's true that the names of two such famous merchants carry some weight. But if we are to be basing our decisions on the weights of names, there are others to whom we should lend our ear. Even here."

Negotiations were the merchants' battleground.

Just as a moment's inattention by a soldier on the battlefield could invite death; likewise, if a merchant was distracted during a negotiation, the contract could be lost.

Lawrence's eyes had been looking elsewhere the moment the men replied, and thus was he slain by those who sat at the round table. His confidence in himself was gone, and the words of another had made him seem a fool.

Sighs were audible from the round table. Lawrence could see Piasky opening his mouth to speak. It felt as though the horizon was shifting crazily and time was slowing down.

If the names of Kieman and Eve could not win them trust, there was nothing to be done.

They had failed.

Then, just when Lawrence was mentally murmuring the words to himself—

"Lawrence."

It was a familiar voice, saying a very unfamiliar thing.

He looked, and it was Holo next to him.

Holo fixed Lawrence firmly in her gaze, her eyes exasperated. He could hear the sound of various items being cleared from the table and the sound of the door to the room opening, then closing.

But Lawrence kept looking back into Holo's eyes—into those exasperated, red-tinged amber eyes.

Whenever those eyes looked at Lawrence, they always had the answer. Lawrence simply had not realized it yet, but the simple, almost complete answer was always right there.

This fight was not over. He had only to believe that.

Seize the initiative! Think back on the conversation!

Lawrence wracked his brains. There was no time—but merchants are notoriously bad at giving up.

"Wait, also...!" he shouted as loud as his voice would go.

All present flinched and looked at him. They looked as surprised as they would have been if a dead man had come back to life—which was not so very far from the truth. A traveling merchant whose gaze wavers in the middle of a negotiation was a rotting corpse.

After Lawrence's outburst, no further words would come, so the assembled eyes and ears were treated to silence.

But his nervously throbbing left hand was the proof that he was still alive. And the hand that grasped his own reminded him that he wasn't alone.

"I've seen a wolf."

It was but a moment, but silence felt as though it lasted for eternity.

"A wolf?"

"A giant wolf."

Lawrence was not entirely sure why he chose those words. He was only sure that they were the right ones, which was why he had been able to say them.

They had been the answer right from the beginning. What had the men around the table said when they had first decided to hear him out? They had said they would respect his name.

No wonder even Holo had become exasperated with him producing a parchment with others' names on it. They hadn't wanted him to produce proof; instead, they wanted to hear the reason why he personally had such conviction.

"That wolf is why I'm traveling. That giant wolf."

He wondered if they would think he had lost his mind out of

nervousness. Or if they would think he was trying to grab attention with an absurd claim.

Under normal circumstances, his uncertainty would have shown on his face. But since he was not lying, there was no need for uncertainty.

"...Were you born in the north?" one of the men asked.

"These two were." Lawrence indicated Holo and Col, and the four men narrowed their eyes as though looking at something far away. As though Holo and Col were actually in the far-off northlands.

Piasky seemed to be agonizing over when to speak up. Lawrence himself felt as though he were treading on thin ice without looking at his feet, so no wonder it was too terrifying for anyone else to watch.

The four men closed their eyes and were silent.

Lawrence stood there, standing tall. There was no logic to what he was doing.

"I see," said one shortly, breaking the silence. "I see. I suppose this, too, is fate."

"God's blessings be upon us!"

Lawrence was sure he was not the only one who found this reply ominous.

Four men sat at the round table, men whose clothes were suffused with the scent of pepper and saffron, their tones refined and fluid.

"The truth will always be revealed. No matter how extraordinary it may be."

"...Wha—?"

"We've been waiting. Or perhaps that's not quite it—perhaps it's better to say we've been unable to make up our minds."

"What do you...?" Lawrence and Piasky both murmured, then looked at each other.

They might have drooped a bit with age, but the ears of the men around the table were still in good order.

"We had word that the Brondel Abbey had purchased the bones of a wolf. But the decision to act carried consequences too heavy for the four of us to bear. We couldn't commit to the decision. You see..." The man stared at Lawrence, but while his gaze was stern, it was also somehow gentle. "...We're old, and we'd unearthed the information with rusty tools and could not trust it. But if someone younger were to reach the same conclusion without relying on logic alone, then we could believe it."

"S-so..."

"Yes. We know that Brondel Abbey is backed into a corner. There will be no more delaying. But if they've truly purchased the wolf bones, there is action we may take."

The four men all smiled tired smiles.

"The war has been hard on old men like us. When you get to this age, you fight with dirty tricks."

"Quite so! Our opponent has no shortcomings, but this information will be a fatal poison to the abbey."

The men at the table suddenly began talking like men their age would.

Piasky looked down, and Lawrence found himself doing likewise. Holo cocked her head to one side, and while Col did not appear to understand very well, he seemed relieved.

It filled Lawrence with a bitter feeling to have to say these words to someone other than Holo. The men at the table possessed cunning to warrant it, though, and pockets deep enough.

"Well, then," Lawrence and his companions had no choice but to say. "Please leave it to us."

The old men were acting out of self-interest and practicality. They could use Lawrence and his companions to act in their

stead. And Lawrence in turn was on the path to success. The relationship was not so simple as attacker and victim.

Lawrence was attracted to Holo for just that perverse reason—she was not so easily dealt with.

And Lawrence had come to seize those reins.

"Incidentally, I also have this." He produced another letter from his breast pocket.

This one bore the seal of the king of Winfiel and was a declaration of taxation.

"This is... but... how did you...?"

It was Lawrence's turn to smile and meet that question with silence. Clearing his throat, he continued, "I believe this taxation decree could lead to one of the following outcomes."

As Lawrence took the center stage and began to speak, the four men could not help giving him the whole of their attention.

The traditional way of avoiding taxes was to simply claim not to have the money.

Tax could not be collected when there was nothing to collect, and a nation where homes and goods were constantly seized was a nation none would visit.

But given that, people would use every possible method to hide their money, thus beginning the battle of wits between tax collector and citizen.

Money was hidden in vases and buried under floorboards. Golden statues were encased in lead. There were all sorts of methods, and the essential advantage remained with the hider. Moving huge amounts of money would be obvious, but move small amounts at a time up into the mountains for burial and who would know? And there were always far more taxpayers than there were tax collectors.

But did the king, council of elders, or Church then give up

on taxation? God always opened another door. No matter how few the tax collectors or how many coins were buried, they were always creating new ways to force taxation.

Of course, using brute force was a double-edged sword.

If you hit someone with a staff, your hand would hurt where you held that same staff. There were always limitations, and on that count the kingdom of Winfiel could count itself fortunate.

King Sufon had only taxed by force when absolutely necessary—that is, when he had to collect old coins and mint new ones. Under such conditions, it was forbidden to circulate old coins, which meant that coins hidden in bottles or buried under floorboards became completely useless.

While digging such coins up and melting them down for their base metals would yield a certain amount of value, melting coins was not free, and town furnaces were closely observed.

Thus, everyone would bring their old coins to the mint. The king would then exchange old coins for new at whatever rate he liked, which allowed him to levy a tax.

"Traditionally the abbey will have money. The king knows this, which is why he's chosen this method. Even a merchant will have a nest egg in either cash or real goods. I very much doubt they'll be holding certificates."

"The king is probably thinking to seize this opportunity to destroy the abbey, which holds such influence in this area, while simultaneously driving us from his nation. He'll both seize the abbey's land in lieu of taxes, then conveniently rid himself of us by eliminating our goal."

"He's probably also thinking to monopolize the wool trade."

"That's quite possible. Nowhere else moves nearly as much wool. He could set prices however he liked."

Lawrence, Holo, and Col stood around the round table with Piasky opposite Lawrence. In the center of the table lay a

branching diagram that Lawrence and Col had labored all night to construct. Even if one was not clever enough to improvise such deductions on the spot, given time and careful thought, a reasonable plan could be formulated.

"If the abbey hasn't purchased the wolf bones, they would be able to scrape together the coins to comply with the tax. But if they don't have the money at all..."

"...They'll simply pretend to pay," said Piasky, finishing Lawrence's thought. "They could just fill crates with stones, then toss them into a valley somewhere and claim there'd been an accident during the journey. The shepherds doubtless know of places where such an incident could be staged, and if there isn't a valley handy, then a frozen marsh would do fine."

Everyone nodded, and then one of the men at the table spoke up. "So how much money will they be told to move?"

No matter how brilliant they were, a simple number would not be sufficient for a group of old merchants who had been out of the field for so long to really grasp the amount.

"It probably won't be entirely gold coins, so...hmm. Probably ten or fifteen crates, each roughly this size."

"Even if they put them on a sleigh, given the snow, there'll be a limit. They'll have to make it a caravan."

When the two traveling merchants were sharing views, no one else dared to contradict their guesses on travel arrangements.

Lawrence continued. "It won't be a group small enough to hide."

"I see. So if we reveal our knowledge of the tax decree, there will be very little they can do. And if we offer to cooperate with them in their tax evasion, we might get a seat at the negotiating table."

It was as though they were discussing in which direction a cornered rat would flee.

Lawrence remembered being treated as a mere speck himself back in the port town of Kerube. Compared with this, his old life of buying and selling seemed peaceful and bucolic.

It was not as though he preferred one over the other. But this was an entirely different kind of risk than he had experienced before, which somehow made it easier for him to think through clearly.

"If we're going to act, we should act soon. If we induce them to panic, they might do something rash and lose everything. After all, no matter how desperate they become, they're still servants of God. The could decide to die as martyrs rather than live in shame."

"And some of them are worthy of a measure of respect. We're not thieves. We must act carefully."

There was a proverb: "The castle on the hill is seen by all." It meant that a person of status had to act in ways that befit their position. It did not seem the men around the table needed to be told that.

"Well, then, let's reveal the truth to the monks here in the annex. Is the unpleasant pair from before still wandering about somewhere?"

"I'll go check. If they can't be found, shall we tell the others?"

"No, don't tell them. Those two are the louts of the sanctuary. Tell Prior Lloyd. He should be doing his daily duties at the moment, and most of all, he can actually still ride a horse."

This elicited a ripple of laughter since many of the monks in the area were too fat to ride.

"Very well," Piasky replied politely as he bowed his head.

"Let's have men posted in all the taverns and lodges, just to be safe. Though I doubt the sluggish sanctuary council will be able to reach a quick enough decision to start moving crates."

"There are some blood relatives of some of the high-ranking

monks in the royal court. Given those connections, the monastery may be anticipating things to a certain extent, so we can't be too careful."

"Quite so. However, I do think everything will work out in our favor."

"The blessings of God be upon us."

And with those words, the meeting was concluded.

It was as though the annex had caught fire. In fact, the commotion was so great that the figure of speech felt more like a description of the actual truth.

The prior, a monk named Lloyd, was so disturbed that he accidentally dropped the book of scripture he was piously clutching as he listened to the news of the king's decree; then when he went to pick it up, he knocked over a candlestand instead.

The snow and wind had stopped, so he immediately arranged for horses, along with five horsemen to drive them, and took the notorious pair of monks from earlier with him on a torch-lit ride on the snowy road to the main abbey.

Given that they spent their days dealing with the wool trade, the monks at the abbey's mercantile annex had the calculating minds one would expect, and they hurried to the alliance officers' inn rooms to ingratiate themselves, just in case.

Piasky hurriedly put a list of demands for the abbey in order, working with his comrades to settle the scale of the village he hoped to create and the things they would need to do so.

It seemed to Lawrence that everyone was working toward a common goal.

Speaking of Lawrence, he was thoroughly questioned on everything he knew about the wolf bones and was kept very busy handling the evaluation of that information—the connection of the Jean Company and the Debau Company, the flow of coins, the

treatment of goods, the reception of the story of the wolf bones in Kerube—everything. Even Holo and Col added what they had learned over the course of their journey.

With utter preparation, the abbey would be defeated. A strange sense of excitement filled the air.

In the middle of all of this, Holo left to update Huskins on the situation and then returned.

It was late, and Lawrence was thoroughly tired when Holo came back with Huskins's message, but when he learned what Huskins had said—"I'm sorry I can't be of more help"—he couldn't very well sleep.

"'Tis true, we no longer possess any real power."

Dawn was breaking by the time Holo spoke those self-recriminating words, by which time everyone had performed their respective roles, crystallizing knowledge and wisdom and delivering the results to those in the best positions to utilize them.

It was sad but also somehow bracing.

Not even her claws and fangs could stop the might this many humans could muster. And surely no animal could match the strength shown by humans when they worked together in such numbers.

Various alliance members slept here and there around the room, exhausted. Holo smiled as she looked them over. She might even have been feeling a bit jealous.

"Huh. When I grow weary, look how maudlin I become."

Col was curled up against the wall, completely spent.

Lawrence put his arm around Holo's shoulders and pulled her close as though supporting her head.

The sky was visible through the window, so clear and blue it felt as though one were being pulled up into it.

If ever there could be a day when all would go according to plan, surely it would be a day like this one.

Holo soon dozed off, and Lawrence realized he, too, must have fallen asleep.

There was shout from someone running through the gates. At first, Lawrence thought it was part of a dream he was having.

"They're here! The men from the main abbey are here!"

The abbey proper had been built on a grassy plain perfect for construction. It meant that anyone approaching from that direction could be naturally identified as a messenger from the central building.

Immediately after Lawrence raised his head and realized he wasn't dreaming, he jumped to his feet and dashed to the entrance. Merchants lined the road, their gazes all directed to the gates that opened to the vast plains beyond.

"Aren't they here yet?"

"Hush!"

Many such exchanges could be heard here and there before all fell completely silent.

Then—the silence was broken by the heavy footsteps of a horse, at which the alliance leaders filed out of the inn, as though having been waiting.

Lawrence and the rest stepped aside to let them pass, but they were still mostly surrounded by curious merchants.

The sound of horses' hooves drew nearer and then stopped.

They were in front of the inn.

There was a single large horse led by two footmen.

"I am a messenger from the abbot," said the large man who sat atop the horse. He was wearing a long fur-lined robe that hid even his feet, and his hood was pulled so low it was difficult to see his face.

But the problem was not his clothing.

What everyone assembled found odd was that he had come

with only two horsemen and spoke with such a threatening manner from high up on his horse.

Everyone, Lawrence included, had expected all the abbey leaders, including the abbot himself, to arrive ashen-faced.

"Thank you for coming. Perhaps we should move inside, first."

In contrast to the merchants milling about the area, one finely dressed man addressed the messenger with a politeness that spoke of years of practice.

In point of fact, the inn was already making ready to meet their guests. The scent of food wafted out, tormenting the stomachs of all who'd endured a night with no meals.

"There is no need," the man replied.

Then in front of the stunned onlookers, the mounted man produced a sealed letter from his breast pocket, affixed it to the end of his riding crop, and then handed it to the member of the alliance as though he were the bearer of a royal command.

"This is the abbot's reply: 'As the servants of God, we will never submit to faithless foreigners. Never! We shall pay the king his taxes and continue to offer our prayers to God.'"

The instant the confused alliance representative took the letter, the mounted man struck his horse's hindquarters with the crop. His mount wheeled, his driver frantically holding the reins.

The man did not bother saying farewell.

The only sound that reached Lawrence and the rest of the assembled crowd's ears was the *thump, thump* of the horse's feet.

All they saw was its rear.

Stunned, all were silent.

"What is the meaning of this?" someone murmured; it didn't matter who—it was what everyone was thinking.

The letter was passed to the four men who had sat at the round table, and they opened it on the spot. Once each man read it, he

passed it to the next. The letter left behind palely confused faces in its wake.

"It's impossible... do they claim they'll have funds left over, even after they pay their tax?"

That statement was all that was necessary to guess at the contents of the letter.

A commotion began to stir as each person started chattering with his neighbor. But there was no conclusion to be drawn from these conversations. That the abbey had been in dire straits was nearly incontrovertible fact.

"This can't be... What are they thinking? Do they believe they can gain the king's protection by paying his tax? They should know better than anyone such a thing will not happen..."

The king had been constantly extorting the abbey, although not specifically in anticipation of this tax. It was hard to imagine the abbey suddenly trusting him now.

Confusion was spreading like a drop of oil in water.

It seemed there was now a real possibility the abbey had not purchased the wolf bones and, in fact, did have sufficient funds set aside in order to pay the tax.

But even so, there was no reason for them to behave so bullishly toward the alliance. It was always better to have more partners to provide emergency funds, just in case.

So had they come up with some clever stratagem? Had they somehow extracted some sort of guarantee from the king?

Amid all the discussion, a merchant watching the tumult from a distance suddenly raised his voice high. "If they said they'll be paying the tax, won't that mean they'll have to transport the money? Then we have but to confirm that! If it comes out that they're actually unable to pay—"

The majority opinion seemed to be that the abbey was truly

unable to pay, but even if it did, it was obvious that it would immediately face more difficulty.

So it made sense to conclude that the abbey would be filling crates with pebbles, and if there was a bet to be made, that was the wisest one.

"Or maybe they plan to feign an accident while we're still thrown into confusion!" said another merchant.

"That could be. Perhaps that's why they arrived at their decision so quickly. They don't want to give us any time to think."

Voices rose in support of this notion. *"Yes, that's it!"*

Lawrence looked at the leaders standing at the edge of the crowd; they did not seem to agree. Neither did Lawrence.

"Did the letter say when they were going to pay the tax?"

If the abbey was truly planning to force confusion upon the alliance while making its countermove, it might well have been confident enough to write the exact date on the letter. And that did in fact seem to be the case.

Lawrence knew why the leader holding the letter had such a bitter look on his face. The abbey wanted them to read the date aloud. And now the situation was out of control; there was no way the alliance leaders could hide it.

"Today at midday, following the path Saint Hiuronius took across the snowy plains."

"I knew it! They're practically challenging us to come!"

"If they're leaving at midday, there's no time to waste. The area around Sulieri Hill is mostly bogs—the perfect place for faking an accident."

"Let's go! Profit takes courage!"

Most of the men were giddy from their long night spent working, and the battle cry they shouted had a strange energy.

Holo had found Lawrence's side, and she tugged on his sleeve,

but he did not know what to do. The alliance leaders themselves looked at a loss, and why would they not?

Lawrence, not being a member of the alliance, was able to be a bit more objective, and as he thought about it, he came to another conclusion.

There was a possibility that this was a trap set by the abbey.

If the crowd's strange energy led them to confuse courage for profit, they might attack the procession carrying the crates.

If those crates were filled with stones, then all would be well. But if they truly held coins, what then?

The alliance would immediately be trapped.

The abbey had no obligation to show them the contents of its crates, which the alliance mob would dispute, and the argument would be a heated one. It would be easy for the abbey to then claim that the alliance was attempting to commit the unforgivable crime of trying to steal the tax funds.

Or they could simply claim that the alliance *had* stolen the funds en route to the king, and the conflict would then worsen as each side clung to their own story. It would be a completely fruitless dispute that might end in bloodshed, which would simply strengthen the abbey's claims.

If the king were to resolve the dispute, he would see it as a chance to rid himself of an alliance that was trying to take control of his nation's economy and would surely rule in favor of the abbey.

At which point, the alliance would be cornered by the abbey and would have no choice but to do as they were told.

Would they be forced to pay the abbey's taxes and buy up its wool at a high price? In any case, the abbey would try to extort as much money as it possibly could.

But the leaders of the alliance could not say this aloud, and Lawrence knew why.

Without opening the crates, there was no way of knowing whether they contained stones or coins. The leaders feared that opposing the will of their members without proof would only serve to fracture the alliance.

Just as they had cornered the abbey and looked for a fracture to exploit, now they themselves were trapped in the very same way. But the alliance leaders had to stay neutral because they, too, were members of their alliance. Their goal was the same, and they feared division.

So what about Lawrence, who was not a member and who did not share the same goal?

Lawrence had good reasons for wanting to prevent the alliance from falling into a trap. If the abbey was trying to use the alliance and had laid this trap for them, and the alliance did indeed fall into that trap, it would put Lawrence in an exceedingly poor position.

The abbey might be thinking that if it exploited the alliance's weakness, it could lead them about at will, but the alliance was a group of merchants, and merchants prized profit above all else.

As soon as they determined that the reward did not merit the trouble, they would simply withdraw.

Lawrence could tell that these were not the alliance's most important dealings, given that the top-level leaders, the ones who rode around in black carriages, had long since disappeared.

Which meant that the moment it became clear the alliance had stumbled into a trap, there was a good chance they would simply settle things up and retreat. And they would probably never return.

Who would protect the abbey then?

The abbey might gain a temporary stability, but without the alliance, all it would have was sheep producing wool for which there was no longer a buyer. If the price of wool rose, Lawrence

could understand this sort of optimism. Anyone would want to believe a once high price would rise again, all the more so when it was something that had always sold well in the past.

The abbey would not last long before collapsing.

What waited for them after that was the royal annexation of their lands and the dissolution of the abbey. The land would be parceled up among various nobility in order to buy their support, and Lawrence could see all too clearly the fighting that would break out over the sizes of those parcels.

When war broke out, those who lived there were always driven from the region—which meant people like Huskins.

Next to Lawrence, Holo and Col also wore uneasy expressions. Holo could defeat anyone with her teeth and claws. But the nature of that power was not one that could change these events.

Lawrence had good reason to speak to the men who were even now readying to form up and march across the snowy plains.

"The abbey may have laid a trap." The most nervous faces of all were the ones of those who had been thinking the same thing but had held their tongues. "If we go, we'll be playing right into their hands."

When he added this second statement, the other merchants stopped and glared at him. "Why is that?"

"If we open the crates and they're filled with coin, that does the alliance no good."

"Perhaps. But it's just as likely we'll play into their hands by *not* opening the crates. We've done all this work and it's come to nothing. So now we have this chance, and it's a good one. What could it be but God's will? If we let this chance slip, all of this will have been wasted!"

A cry of assent from the crowd followed these words. It was entirely clear who they thought was the coward and who they

thought was brave. One hardly ever saw philosophers hailed as heroes, after all.

"And if we do fall into a trap, what then? We'll just escape. We were going to leave if we couldn't buy the land anyway, so it matters little. So why let this chance for profit escape?"

"That's right!"

The crowd pushed forward, backing Lawrence, Holo, and Col up against a wall. Lawrence caught glimpses of the leaders, who continued to avoid reining in the angry alliance merchants.

"Wait... you're not even with the alliance, are you?"

Lawrence felt a chill in his gut, but not because of the cold weather.

To one who lived by travel, those words inspired more terror than any wolf's howl could. He looked around and saw only men who answered to a different authority than he did.

"You're just trying to divide us and buy them some time."

When accused of being a spy, it was nearly impossible to clear one's name. The only statement they would accept from Lawrence would be him admitting that he was indeed a spy.

"So, what of it?"

A bead of sweat rolled down Lawrence's cheek, and his vision swam. His dagger was buckled to his belt, but that was meaningless in a large group of people like this. And the instant he unsheathed it, any chance to prove his innocence would disappear.

What could he do? His mind raced.

Huskins had left everything to him, because the old sheep felt his hooves could find no purchase in the complicated human world. And now Lawrence and his companions were about to be crushed between the teeth of gears that were turning the wrong direction.

The crowd pushed closer. There was nowhere to run.

Was there truly nothing? Truly? Not even a paradox or a loophole?

Lawrence racked his brains as he tried to shield Holo and Col. If he could not reverse this situation and stop the alliance from pursuing this course of action, the ruin of the abbey would be a near certainty.

Huskins would lose the second home he had worked so hard to create, and Holo would learn yet again that there was no place for her kind in this world.

Lawrence could not stand idly by and let that happen.

If a single merchant lifted his hand, the mob would take that as a sign and attack.

It was over.

Holo put her hand to her chest as though giving up.

Was this the only place where the beings once worshipped as gods could still employ their astounding power? Lawrence hated himself for putting Holo in this painful place; he wanted to cry out.

Huskins, too, would surely put this land behind him—taking his sheep, his countless sheep with him.

"Huh—?"

The moment the avalanche was about to come crashing down on them, the image of a huge flock of sheep moving across the landscape filled his vision.

"Wait, please!" shouted Lawrence. "Wait! There's a way to find out what's in the crates!"

The instant before the explosion came, silence fell. He had driven his wedge in at the very last second.

"What'd you say?"

This was the only chance he would have to calm the raging

mob. One of the leaders seemed to realize this and took the opportunity to speak. "Wait! Let's hear him out!"

It was not overstatement to say that they were on the verge of bloodshed. Lawrence took a deep breath, exhaled, and then took another deep breath.

"A trap is useless if you don't catch the game you're after."

"What do you mean?" asked another one of the leaders.

"If they're after the alliance, all we have to do is let someone else fall into the trap. It'll be useless then."

"Hmph... so, are you saying you'll go in our place?"

That line of thinking was pointless. Just as proving to the alliance he was not a spy was impossible—likewise, proving to the abbey he was not a member of the alliance would be impossible. So Lawrence shook his head.

"Well, then, who will undertake this duty?"

Lawrence was not completely confident in the idea he had come up with.

But it was Holo and her grasp on his hand that helped him regain his courage and composure. He would never have undertaken this risk if he was only acting for himself.

"The sheep."

Everyone froze at Lawrence's brief answer.

Then—

"Oh, of course!"

And the gears began turning the other direction.

It goes without saying that sheep are herbivores and a fine example of a gentle creature. However, just as Norah the shepherdess had once said, sheep did not know the meaning of restraint.

This was even true of Huskins, the golden sheep. Once he had made his mind up on something, he could not be dissuaded. He

was unperturbed eating the flesh of his own kind to blend into the human world.

If so led by their shepherd, a flock of sheep would not stop even at the edge of a cliff. It was not uncommon for people to be badly injured if they were swept away by such a flock.

The abbey had laid a trap and depending on circumstances was prepared to spill alliance blood when they fell into it, claiming justification. But before a wave of sheep, not even a grizzled mercenary band could stand.

And Lawrence had seen the size of the merchant annex flocks for himself and knew firsthand how skilled their shepherds were.

So none had opposed his proposal.

"So that's how it is."

Huskins sat by the hearth like a rock gathering moss, and when Lawrence finished explaining the situation and plan, he moved very slowly.

"You want me to use sheep... to attack humans?"

"To put it simply, yes." Holo stood disinterested at the entrance. Col had remained back in the alliance inn as a sort of hostage. "Will you lend us your strength, Mr. Huskins?"

For a plan involving sheep, there did not exist a better-suited individual.

If there was a problem at all, it would be in his pride as the golden sheep—his pride as one who had once been called a god. Those might be obstacles.

Thinking about it himself, Lawrence realized Huskins could no longer act either openly or in secret, and he had to use his ancient power in a manner that was compatible with the customs of humans.

He was not even a shadowy influence; he had been reduced to nothing but a pawn.

Truly understanding that with his heart held a different

weight than the mere intellectual comprehension of it, Lawrence realized.

Lawrence himself had found it difficult the first time someone had dismissed his name, only to change their bearing entirely when they heard the name of his guild. Such moments that made him truly feel how insignificant he was and that the world was a very big place.

Huskins threw another log onto the fire, and the flames flickered brightly.

"Hah-hah... so it's finally come to this for us, eh?"

His words made it seem as though he enjoyed having fallen so far, and they were refreshingly clear.

Having taken human form and crossed a line past which he could never return, he still had some dignity. Watching his last defenses finally crumble was somehow painful and simultaneously beautiful.

But hearing Huskins's words, it was Holo who interjected and entered the room. "Have you forgotten just who it was who asked for my companion's aid?"

Huskins turned his thick neck, staring at Holo as the corners of his mouth turned up.

"Holo," Lawrence said, which made Huskins look back from Holo to him and speak, his voice cheerful.

"I don't mind. Only a man can understand the beauty of decline, after all."

Once he led wild sheep across grassy plains; now he tried to protect his comrades' tiny remaining refuge. His sense of responsibility and purpose covered him like armor, hiding his true emotions. Bitterness, sadness, anger, refusal—he had to swallow them all and keep moving forward.

Huskins *was* his flock of sheep.

And with that one sentence, the scholarly shepherd showed

that blood ran through his veins, that he was capable of appreciating wit.

It was enough to cut Holo short, who seemed to think she was being made fun of and wanted to make a retort.

Lawrence stood and lent Huskins a hand. "So you'll help us, then?"

Huskins was slightly shorter than Lawrence, but his sturdy frame gave off an imposing air. He was a man to be reckoned with.

The curly silver hairs of his hair and beard shook as though lightning struck. In that brief instant, Lawrence got a glimpse of Huskins's true form.

"Of course. Who but me could do it?" He picked up his shepherd's staff, which jingled. "I thank you kindly. With this I feel I'll finally have found a place in this new world."

Even Lawrence could not help a pained smile at these words.

Huskins then looked at Holo and continued, "We cannot act with the freedom we once had. But..." He looked down at his hand, then finally to the fire that had finally caught the new log. "But we still have homes, and we still have roles to play. You haven't yet seen your homeland, so don't start weeping just yet. You'll make this poor young man's life very hard."

Holo's eyes went wide, and even through her hood, it was clear her ears had pricked up in irritation. Undoubtedly her tail was swishing rapidly, too. And yet all she could muster as Huskins left the room was a quiet murmur.

"A mere sheep, and yet—"

There were things only Holo and Huskins could comprehend. They exchanged but the briefest of looks, but from that they had come to a mutual understanding, Lawrence could tell.

Lawrence took Huskins to the alliance inn, with Holo following

behind at a short remove. All who had worked in the merchants' annex agreed that Huskins was the right choice.

Things proceeded smoothly, and in no time at all, a flock of sheep was made ready.

The monks who remained at the annex seemed confused over why the flock was being taken out at this strange hour. The sound of the sheep's hooves as they flooded out of the pen echoed like the rumbling of an earthquake.

Lawrence and Holo held hands as they watched the lone form of Huskins recede. His staff in hand, he led the flock out.

EPILOGUE



A group of horses kicked snow up as they disappeared over the horizon.

Their destination was the main abbey, where they would witness the final battle take place.

The rider at the head kept in his bosom a powerful weapon, one that had been constructed over the night. It was sharper than any other, thanks to crucial information that Huskins had provided.

Settling things now would take no great time or effort.

Picturing the abbey leaders as they trudged along the hard-packed snow of the road, having been driven from the abbey—well, one could not help but feel a bit sad for them.

Their decision making had been exemplary, and they had surely chosen the best option of those that remained.

If Lawrence had not pointed out the trap that had been set for the alliance, then one of the leaders would have had to. Doing so would have divided the alliance, leaving it unable to properly function.

So even if a group went out to confirm the contents of the crates, it would not have been a very large group. And that had been the goal all along, Lawrence was certain.

Piasky had been the first to disappear over the horizon and was even now surely in the grand halls of the main abbey, delivering the alliance's proposal.

The crates had been full of stones.

Which meant that the abbey was very likely to have a secret reserve of coins hidden away, or else the possibility that it had the wolf bones was very high. Both were secrets that the abbey could ill afford having revealed to the king.

But the abbey leaders were not fools and knew when it was time to surrender. Being out of options, all they could do now was find a way to make their surrender with as much dignity as they could manage, finding a way to weather adversity and stubbornly survive as they had in the past.

Lawrence inhaled a long, thin breath of air, then exhaled. The snowy plains looked like a sea frozen in time, and walking along under the clear blue sky was not at all unpleasant.

Lawrence was alone.

He had not been surprised when Holo picked up her coat and jumped on a horse with the first group without as much as a "by your leave." Given that the abbey, once confronted, would have no choice but to reveal its treasures, Holo's tail was probably swishing excitedly even at this very moment.

The snowy path that Lawrence walked had been trampled by countless sheep and was as easy to walk as a street paved in stones. He reached the place called Sulieri Hill without much effort.

From there one could circle the hilltop's crest and very clearly see the path of the road that wrapped around the hill from the northeast. There was no better vantage point from which to witness the utter failure of the abbey's schemes.

"Swords and bows would've been useless."

Here and there were splotches of red on the path, the proof of the few who had used their weapons out of panic.

But just as whatever powers Holo or Huskins might possess were useless in the face of humanity, so too did weapons have little effect on such a vast flock of sheep.

Surrounded by the flock and trampled into unconsciousness, the monks had all been loaded on a sleigh and taken off. They must have been waiting for the alliance men to come and demand to see the coins, which would make them easy targets for the blame the monks would place on them.

They carried too much arms and armor for anything else, even if they had been transporting actual money. If it had come to an actual battle, there was no doubt that the casualties would have been significant.

Lawrence looked the scene over when Huskins, who was collecting his flock on the path, took notice of him and began walking over.

"Ho, there." Such a carefree greeting.

"I'm glad to see you unhurt."

"Hah... well, of course. Never would have thought I would be able to end this with my own hands."

"It was the decisive blow."

"I suppose so... My kind stands above humans. And humans stand above sheep. But times change. It's natural for that order to be reversed."

The abbey had never imagined that the alliance would use a flock of sheep. Even Lawrence, if he had not had Huskins on his side, would never have conceived of a plan like this.

"Ah, by the way, where'd that young wolf get off to?"

"Ah, Holo? I expect she's in the abbey's treasure vault as we speak."

"Hah! Hah. Is that so?" Huskins chuckled for a moment and then dropped his gaze.

"Is something the matter?"

"Hmm? Ah, no, it's nothing. I treated that wolf like a child, but it seems that I'm the childish one." He narrowed his eyes and looked into the distance. Beneath his beard was a happy smile. "Hardship forges strong friendships. I have the sense that I've found myself a member of a different flock entirely."

"...Do you mean—?"

"I see you take my meaning. Wolf and sheep are wolf and sheep. That's only the natural order of things."

Huskins exhaled a large breath, almost sighing. He then inhaled and rang his staff's bell.

His sheepdog ran off, quickly gathering the sheep that were beginning to stray in various directions. Huskins watched this for a while, then turned to Lawrence and spoke again.

"How long do *you* plan to ignore natural order?"

Lawrence looked at him out of the corner of his eye and saw Huskins watching his sheepdog past squinting eyes. He scratched his head and did not immediately answer.

"I'm a merchant—so I'll do it as long as there's more profit to be had."

Practical answers often sounded like jokes. After a moment of silence, Huskins laughed aloud. "It was a foolish question. I'm no different—I'm a sheep, yet I've become quite fond of my sheepdog."

"Why would you ask me such a thing?"

Huskins gave a deliberate grin. His profile made him look like an old soldier who had seen many battles.

"I can't decide which side to tell."

"Tell what?"

"This is a place where people gather, so information naturally collects here, too."

Huskins was a sheep. He had told Lawrence that his companions were still scattered across the landscape, which meant that information from a vast area would collect here.

He looked Lawrence straight in the eyes, his gaze belying a depth of experience that only someone like him could have.

"The wolf told me that you're bound for an ancient place called Yoitsu, yes?"

"Th-that's right."

"I've heard that name and recently, too."

Lawrence did not reply, but with his eyes urged Huskins to continue. Huskins know Holo was searching for her homeland, so he could hardly be ignorant of how important this information was.

And yet if he had hesitated to give that information to Holo, there had to be a good reason for that.

"It came up among some disturbing news my comrades brought to me."

Lawrence's heart quickened. He could guess at what the news might be.

"Our king's tax and the wolf bones you deduced that Brondel Abbey purchased—they may have a connection to this news. You see—"

As Huskins spoke, a gust of wind rose, blowing up the fallen snow and briefly obscuring his face. Lawrence was in that moment unable to see what sort of expression he had made.

But given the news, he could guess.

When Huskins was done speaking, he began walking down the hill to retrieve his flock but stopped long enough to turn and say one last thing.

"Good fortune to you." His face was quiet and calm as he regarded Lawrence as though looking at something very bright. His gaze then flicked off in another direction, his expression belatedly showing a smile. "And my thanks."

He then began walking again. The old shepherd began tending his flock as though Lawrence was not there at all.

Lawrence watched Huskins's form recede and heaved a deep sigh. Then, turning on his heel, he too began to walk.

"Good fortune to you." It was a farewell one gave to a friend setting out on a journey. Huskins's words were more than enough to set Lawrence back on his travels, and he would not have been surprised to learn that the news Huskins had given him was true.

Such things did happen, after all, but usually in far-off lands, and news of them was treated as being good for little more than fodder for tavern gossip.

What should he think of the idea that someone so important to him was involved in such a thing?

The sunlight reflecting off the snow was very bright, and Lawrence could not help but tend to squint—but there was another reason he narrowed his eyes.

There were two figures walking back in the direction of the annex, at a slight remove from the sheep-trampled path.

"Any luck?"

At Lawrence's question the two figures paused in their labored walking through the snow, then began moving again. They stayed off the easier-to-tread path, kicking snow up childishly as they went, which accounted for their slow progress.

As they approached Lawrence, he could see that both Holo's and Col's cheeks were bright red from the cold.

"So, how did it go?"

Holo kicked snow up into the air as she took great shuffling steps with Col behind her. She paused for a moment and then answered, "What do you think?"

"Fake," Lawrence answered—too quickly, given the irritated look Holo gave him.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I can't have you crying again."

Holo's lips curled into a smile as she gave a purposeful shrug,

then kicked snow high into the air. "'Twouldn't bother me so much either way. I'm Holo the Wisewolf, after all."

She finally moved over to the sheep-trod path and nearer to Lawrence, having either satisfied her snow-kicking desires or tired of getting the hem of her robe wet. As Holo knelt and patted off the snow that stuck to that robe, Lawrence quickly flipped her hood back and touched her exposed neck.

"Your clothes. They're inside out." He was referring to the clothes she wore beneath her robe.

Lawrence sighed and then held Col's hand, who was standing next to them. It was as cold as ice, and Lawrence knew perfectly well they would be numb and tingling.

"They were fake, weren't they?"

If Holo's clothes were inside out, she must have returned from the abbey in her wolf form. If she had been sad, her ears and tail would have betrayed her true feelings.

She had been upset enough to take her wolf form and dashed through the cold with Col on her back.

Lawrence realized all his worry was for nothing. He had been tricked.

"They were fake," said Holo, looking up at the sky.

No matter how considerate a lad he was, it was strange that Col was not angry at having been put in danger of frostbite. Doubtless, Holo had been equivalently terrified until they had learned the truth of the bones.

"They were probably from a stag, from the thickest part of the hind leg. Surely it was buried for a long time."

"I wish I could've been next to you when they opened the box," said Lawrence, getting a laugh from Col and a stomp to the foot from Holo.

The moment was very peaceful. One could not help but wish it would stay.

"And just what do you think you are grinning at? How vulgar."

"It's nothing. Come, let's hurry back. We'll need to make a fire in the hearth."

Holo wore a dubious expression, but when she saw Lawrence begin walking, she did not press her question. Instead she took Col's hand and called out in a high voice, "Aye, to make stew with plenty of salt and meat!"

Smiling at her constant self-interest, Lawrence did not see what his gaze pointed out. He was preoccupied with what Huskins had told him.

If true, Lawrence had glimpsed something frightening indeed. And yet Huskins had chosen to tell him and not Holo.

This was the place Huskins had chosen to protect.

So what, then, of Lawrence?

An image rose up in Lawrence's mind—Huskins leading his flock, staff in hand, as he protected his land and the land of his kind.

The sky spread out, vast and clear and blue.

Lawrence took the hands of his two precious companions as they started the walk back to the dormitory.

AFTERWORD

Hello again. This is Isuna Hasekura. And somehow, this is the tenth volume.

The first volume of *Spice and Wolf* went on sale in February 2006, so this makes an even three years. It feels somehow both short and long, but I suppose it really is not much time at all. It went by in a flash.

But when I slowly pick up the first volume and open it, I see a mountain of mistakes that I want to get a red pen out and start fixing, so maybe I have grown up a bit.

Although I have no idea what will change in another three years...

Speaking of which, one thing that hasn't changed the past three years is that I'm super into online gaming. Not a new one, but getting back into an old one. I hadn't played it for a really long time, but just around the time I was finishing this tenth volume, I had a little time, so I was lucky enough to get to play a little. The era when I could while away whole days without a care in the world is long gone, and these days every minute, every second I'm logged in is precious. (Incidentally, I started writing this

afterword when I tried to log in and the game servers were down for maintenance.)

A bunch of retired players in the guild I play in have come back, and I was seeing famous player names as I wandered around the in-game town for the first time in years, so it sort of felt like the past had come back to life.

A few days ago, I had the chance to get some food with some friends who play the same game, and even though they supposedly quit because of their jobs, they'd all recently come back to the game for some reason.

But what made me really think about the passage of time was that although after midnight was just when I would start really getting into my gameplay, nowadays when that time rolls around, the number of players drops way off. I think most of the players have shifted from being students to being employed. Even when we have real-life meet-ups, we've stopped going to places aimed at students and started going to joints that cater to a slightly older crowd. It's sort of interesting.

It's going to be fun to see how things turn out in another three years.

And with that I think I've just about filled up the space I have, so we'll leave it at that.

I will see you in the next volume.

—Isuna Hasekura



After the turmoil in Kerube, Lawrence and his companions make for the Kingdom of Winfiel across the sea. Their destination is the great abbey of Brondel, said to hold the wolf bones they seek. Arriving in the kingdom, they hear tell that the abbey, normally prosperous due to its great wool trade, has fallen into a financial crisis. Worse, the most powerful economic force in the world—the Ruvik Alliance—is entering the kingdom with its eye upon the abbey's land holdings...

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