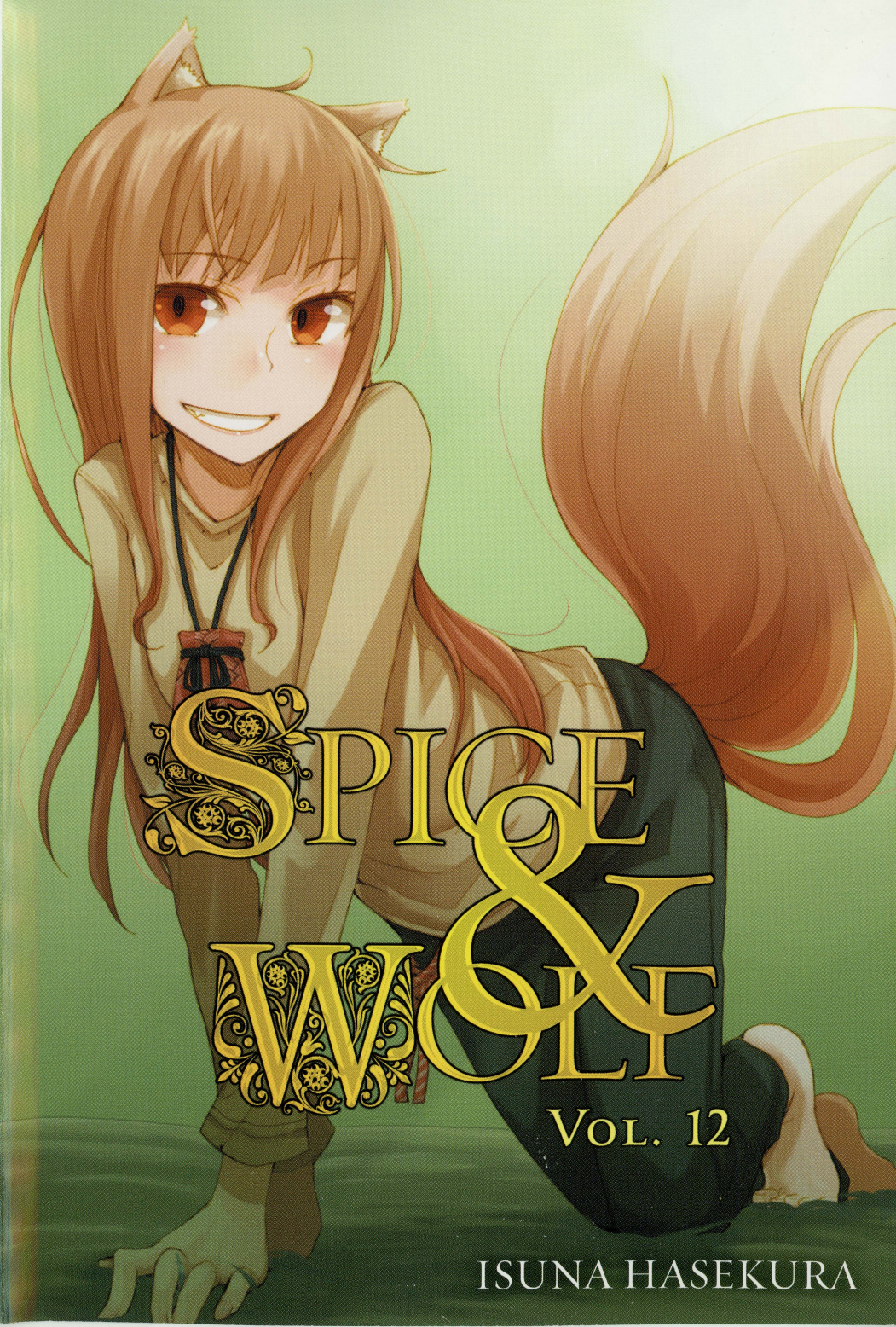

SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 12
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 12

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




"Miss Fran Vonely has returned."
From behind Hugues appeared a young girl.
Hafner Hugues,
the Art Seller
She was just a normal girl—if you ignored
the color of her skin, and her eyes.
"Is this the merchant who called after
me?" Hers was a bewitching beauty; she
had a mysterious charm to her.
Fran Vonely,
the Silversmith


Heureux Mueller,
Leader of Taussig Village
"I appear to have asked him something terrible, as he seemed deeply frightened...," Lawrence said, trying to elicit useful information.
Vino,
a Villager
from
Taussig
The bearded man smiled ruefully. "Misfortune always comes from the outside, after all."


"If you fail, I won't forgive you."
"Of course," Lawrence said, lightly bumping Holo's forehead with his own.
"Of course," he said again.

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VOLUME XII

ISUNA HASEKURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 12
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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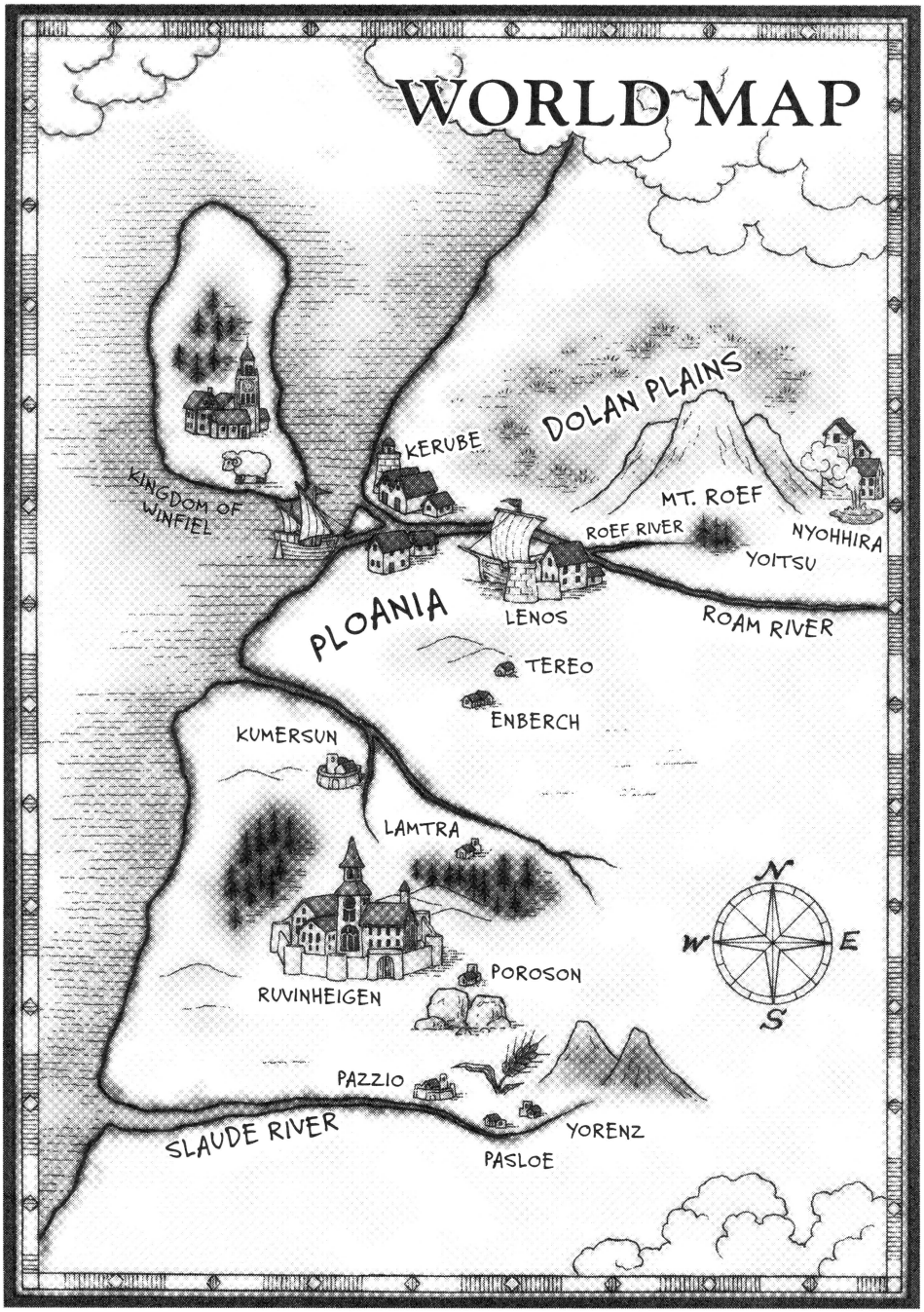
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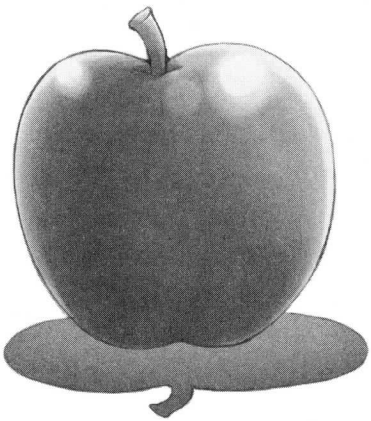
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SPICE & WOLF



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PROLOGUE



Dawn was approaching far across the endless snowy plains. The air was painfully cold, and every breath brought the throb of a headache. The sheep had been let out in the predawn darkness and could be seen at the edge of the horizon.

This scene had repeated itself for centuries and would surely continue to do so for centuries to come—the clear sky; the rolling, snowy hills; and the flock of sheep that trod them.

Lawrence took a breath and then exhaled. The wind carried the vapor away in a swirl, and his eyes followed it as it went.

Beside him, his still-sleepy traveling companion crouched down and poked at the snow with her finger.

"It may be gone, I hear."

The response to his sudden words was no great thing. "One can hardly lose what one does not already have." She made a snowball with her small hands and then tossed it away.

It disappeared in the snow with a soft noise, leaving a hole behind.

"We humans can indeed lose again things we've lost already."

Another snowball opened up a second hole before his companion replied to him. "Such reasoning's beyond the likes of me."

"Do you imagine things are over when you die? It's not so. When we die, we either live on in heaven or die yet again in hell. Losing something already lost is not so very difficult."

His companion decided against making a third snowball and breathed on her cold, red hands. "'Tis dreadful indeed to be a human."

"It surely is." Lawrence nodded.

After a moment passed, his companion put another question to him. "How does one lose such a thing?"

"It's dug up, carved out, with not a trace left behind—or so people say."

Lawrence heard the sound of rustling fabric and turned to see his companion bent over in laughter.

"Aye, 'tis dreadful to be human! Only a pup could dream up such a notion—I surely never could." She straightened and was still fully two heads shorter than him.

Just as the adults' faces he had looked up to as a child always seemed vaguely frightening, the face of any girl he looked down on now always seemed weak and ephemeral. But *this* girl seemed stouthearted and strong, despite her stature, which was surely no illusion.

"Still, 'tis a bit pleasing to hear as much."

"...Pleasing?"

"Aye. The first time, I lost what I did utterly unbeknownst to me. It had nothing to do with me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it from happening."

She took a step, two steps, leaving footprints in the snow, as though to prove the weight of her light-seeming body. The footprints were small but distinct.

"But this time—" The hem of her robe whirled around her, and now the morning sun was to her back as she smiled. "—This time I will be there. 'Twill be my life after death."

She grinned, and from behind her lips peered her sharp fangs.

"I thought there was nothing I could do, but I have another chance. Such happy things do not often happen. I can act or not as I see fit. Much better that than having the matter settled entirely behind one's back, don't you think?"

There were two kinds of strength. One was the strength that came with having something to protect. The other was the strength of having nothing to lose.

"You seem strangely bold," he teased, the breath puffing whitely from his mouth.

"'Tis because I've come upon a wonderful excuse. Regardless of the outcome, I'll have participated in whatever happens. There's a certain comfort in that. It might be even more important than whether things go well or not."

Following her implication to its conclusion suggested that even if she lost out in the end, she might do so without suffering. But when someone seemed to be concealing something and then voiced such a sentiment aloud, one could hardly fail to extend a hand to them.

To lose was one thing, but the challenge of losing with grace was a far more difficult one.

"I must live a good long while yet. I need the hearth of a good excuse to sleep through the cold nights. Something to hold while I sleep that suffices to gaze at when I wake."

It was a difficult thing to meet such words with a smile, yet he had to. Her fearlessness made it seem as though she was proposing they go and steal the great treasures of the world.

"I can't stay with you forever. I can only do so much to aid you. But what I can do for you I will."

She stood there in the snow, the morning sunlight shining down on her small back.

What she wanted to know was not what his stated goal was, but

rather what he could actually accomplish. Her heart was a bit too tender to desire passionate proclamations of his willingness to make any effort or risk any danger.

Perhaps their mutual willingness to simply join hands and walk together without going to any great effort only proved that he was getting older. The smile that appeared on her face was a happy one.

"Well, then, perhaps I will use breakfast as an excuse to see just how far you'll go for me, eh?" Her joke signaled the end of their melancholy conversation. She returned to his side with light, bounding steps, then clung flirtatiously to his arm.

"Just make sure you don't eat so much that this breakfast becomes your last."

Even under the best circumstances, the cost of feeding her was no joke. But what had to be taken even more seriously than said cost was the speed of her wit.

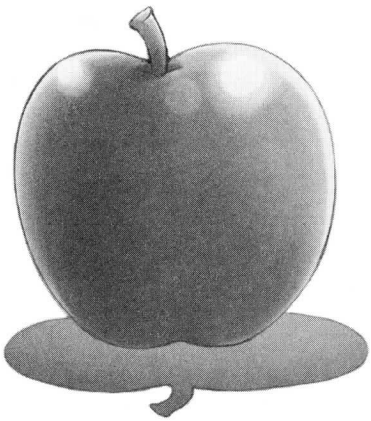
"Aye. After all, you love me so much you can hardly bear it—If I ate enough to please you, my belly would surely burst."

The words that came out of her mouth were a fortress, and if he dared to counterattack, snakes would come slithering out of the grass that surrounded it. Surrender was his only option. He shrugged. "I have no particular desire to kill you."

"Mm." Her red-tinged amber eyes took in the sight of the snow-covered abbey and then closed. "'Tis well. I'd hate to die by your generosity."

Lawrence wondered privately if dawn was the coldest time of day as a reminder from God that it would only become warmer from here.

CHAPTER ONE



I'll call on you later.

Merchants rarely had the luxury of interpreting those words literally. Sometimes it meant *perhaps if we're lucky, we'll talk*, but it could easily be a year or even two before coincidence allowed the promise to be made good upon.

However, when the words came from someone connected to a large economic alliance, they could be taken at face value. As Lawrence and company were on their way back from the great abbey of Brondel in the middle of the snowy plains, bound for the port where they would return to the mainland, they stopped at the same tavern they had used on the way in, and there they received a letter.

The letter came from Piasky, who had expended such effort during the turmoil surrounding the abbey, and it concerned that same abbey, which had attempted in vain to quickly reverse its own failing fortunes.

Long ago the abbey had produced many great saints, but it was tales of a certain holy relic that brought attention to it now.

The probability that the relic was pagan in nature was very high, as was the probability that it was real.

From the perspective of a traveling merchant like Lawrence, such stories belonged in taverns, told over wine. And yet by strange circumstance here he was, reading secret communications from the Ruvik Alliance concerning the great monastery. The Ruvik Alliance, which owned countless trading ships and held sway over even bishops and kings!

He had to laugh.

And yet upon reflection, Lawrence realized that no matter how vast their influence, such alliances were still made of people. And if during one's travels one met a kindred spirit in even a lowly servant, it was worthy of a feast.

The meetings and encounters of humanity were arranged by God, so any number of mysterious things might happen. After all, by any normal standards, the idea of having the companion he did was utterly laughable, but there she was, standing next to him and peering curiously at the letter.

Her hair was chestnut, her chin fine. Her red-tinged amber eyes and her elegant lips. And if her noble beauty was rare, still rarer were the wolf ears beneath her hood. Lawrence's serendipitous traveling companion Holo was neither noble nor human. Her true form was that of a great wolf large enough to devour a man in a single bite, a being from the age of spirits, where she once dwelled within the wheat and ensured its bountiful harvest.

Of course, she herself hated such grandiose descriptions, and as she impatiently swatted his legs with her swishing tail in an effort to hurry his letter reading, the term *charming* seemed much more appropriate than *awe inspiring.*

"When you're done reading, give it back." He held the letter out to Holo, who snatched it away. The holy relic that Brondel Abbey was said to have purchased was a bone from a great wolf, one far from ordinary—a god. In fact, it was a fake, and the letter described the details of its purchase.

Holo had thought the bone might have belonged to one of her pack.

The relief that came when such worries were dispelled was brief. Since at Brondel Abbey, Lawrence had heard another fell rumor surrounding the wolf bone. The letter offered a clue regarding exactly that.

"Still, to think such a great abbey might be swindled so!" said the third member of their party, Col, as he tended the fire.

He looked younger even than Holo appeared, owing partially to the scrawniness brought on by hard, hungry travel. Either that or it was thanks to his humility, which kept him ever humble despite his clever mind.

Lawrence faced the fire. "Who do you suppose would buy a rusty sword?" This was the sort of thing his master had often done when Lawrence was an apprentice—judging the ability of others by asking them an absurd question.

"Er... someone without any... money?"

"Yes. But who else?"

"Someone with too much money—'tis it not so?" said Holo before Col could answer. Evidently she had finished reading the letter.

She sat down between Col and Lawrence and handed the letter to Col. The young, wandering scholar was himself from a pagan town in the north and believed in the gods' existence and so was seeking the truth of the wolf bone for himself.

"Indeed. Those with too much money would buy a rusty sword. Even if it's entirely lost its edge. Such a sword's value is determined in other ways."

"So you're saying that the abbey didn't care whether the bone was real or not?"

The reward for his excellent answer was a pat on the head from Holo. He seemed entirely happy, without so much as a trace

of embarrassment. So happy, in fact, that even the giver of his reward seemed pleased.

"What's more important than who was deceived by whom is whether or not the abbey was able to give the bone sufficient value. And it seems they were."

At Lawrence's words, Col looked down at the letter he had been handed. There was written the only faint possibility of salvation that remained for the abbey.

"It says they were approached by an overseas merchant company with an offer to buy... that's that company, right?"

Col was speaking of the commotion that surrounded the narwhal back in the port town of Kerube. The Jean Company had been at the center of things and had secretly set aside funds to buy the wolf bone.

"They wanted to sell the bone to the Jean Company for a fortune, then whether or not it was real, feign ignorance. But it didn't work."

"And none of that has anything to do with us," said Holo as she roasted a bit of cheese over the fire on a small stick. She popped the bubbling stuff into her mouth, and beneath her hood, her ears pricked up.

"Quite so. Our attention is elsewhere."

At Lawrence's words, Col returned his gaze to the letter. Had it contained anything truly important, it would not be in its conveyance of the facts. Baseless impressions could be very valuable from time to time.

When it came to information that was truly valuable for trading, it would not be had in the letter's contents. What was valuable was that which no one knew, and such secrets came from wild conjecture, not hard proof.

"'It seems such trades have been made all over in recent years. I suspect those at their center have a very different information

network than we possess. It seems to be the north has become unstable. God's protection be upon us all. Piasky.'"

Holo finished chewing her cheese and tossed the stick into the fire. "That agrees with what we heard from old Huskins, does it not?"

Holo generally avoided using people's names, but the name she deigned to utter was that of the true identity of the legendary golden sheep of Brondel Abbey. But it was not simply because Huskins was a similar being to her that she spoke his name. She was an obstinate wisewolf, and if she did not respect someone, she would not spare them more than a this or a that.

"The Jean Company that approached the abbey to purchase the bone was originally a branch of the Debau Company, Mr. Huskins told me. He said that the situation in the north was going to change dramatically based on the interference of the company that owns mines in the region—and that's none other than the Debau Company, a group that has a web of influence quite separate from the Ruvik Alliance."

Huskins had secretly created a home for himself and his kind on the lands of Brondel Abbey in the kingdom of Winfiel. His comrades wandered the land, occasionally returning to exchange tales of what they had heard and seen. Huskins had given Lawrence some of that information—including something regarding their destination, Holo's homelands of Yoitsu, reportedly destroyed centuries earlier.

"So the real bone is already in the hands of the Debau Company?"

"That is a possibility. If it's already on the market, it's even likelier."

Lawrence took the letter back from Col and then tore it up slowly and deliberately.

"Ah—"

Ignoring Col's exclamation and look of shock, Lawrence finished tearing the letter into small pieces and then tossed them into the fire.

"A single paper letter is easily destroyed in water or fire. You use parchment if you want to avoid that, but then disposing of it becomes difficult. Easily destroyed paper is used when writing something secret."

The paper quickly became ash, borne up on the air warmed by the campfire.

"So, what shall we do then, eh?" asked Holo. Both she and Col watched the ash rise into the air, but only Col's gaze was truly on the ash. Holo's amber eyes were gazing at something else.

"Mr. Piasky's letter reinforces what Mr. Huskins told us of the north. Two separate information sources have brought us a similar story. We can safely assume it to be mostly true."

"So this so-and-so company is really driving people from their homes in order to dig up the mountains?"

Col's gaze snapped down from the flying ash.

"Hence the possibility that they're frantically gathering up holy relics without much concern for their authenticity, Mr. Huskins said. Their goal is clear—if you're going to rely upon force of arms, there's no stronger ally than the Church. The Debau Company will certainly try to get the Church on its side. It will let them talk about their annexing the land containing the mines in much more favorable terms."

The campfire crackled quietly.

"A holy war, then. To take back God's land from pagan hands."

Holy relics belonged to the religious world. So the wolf bone that Lawrence and company were chasing, too, would probably be used in Church propaganda, Lawrence thought. If it was from a pagan god, then they would deliberately desecrate it, and when divine punishment failed to arrive, call it proof of the Church's

superiority. Holo had said that no matter how strong her kind might be, they couldn't bite once they'd become bones.

In regions where the breath of the pagan gods still clearly lingered, the reaction would be profound. And if the Debau Company was ready to instigate violence in service of their mining plans, their plans had nothing to do with religious faith and everything to do with profit.

Just as Huskins had so aptly said, whenever the old gods were driven from their forests and mountains, merchants were always behind it. They were not even bothering to hide themselves this time.

"This is probably because so many were put in a bind with the cancellation of the northern campaign. No one wants war where they live, but if it's a far-off land, it's a welcome event. Foodstuffs and supplies fly off the shelves, and the mercenaries that plague fields and villages are all occupied far away. If things go well, nobles that went off to war return rich with plunder, which may then be shared."

"And so much the better if the land attacked is a pagan one, eh?" said Holo.

Holo's homeland of Yoitsu had been destroyed centuries earlier, so the story went. But the forests and rivers she knew should still be there, along with a sunny hilltop somewhere where she could nap. In that sense, her homelands should still exist.

But the search for gold, silver, or other metals would literally change the landscape. Trees would be felled, rivers dammed. In but a moment, it would become a place she had never seen before.

"Er—" Col politely raised his hand, seemingly on the verge of tears. He was another of the few who were taking action to protect their homes from the Church's oppression. "Do we know where, um, the attack will happen?"

"We do not. However," said Lawrence, giving the boy a comforting smile, "we can prepare. The larger the operation, the

more impossible it becomes to hide. Even if we can't stop things entirely, we can turn the spearpoint away from the places we want to protect."

Col nodded, a pained look on his face. He bit his lower lip.

Twenty years hence, it was possible that Col would have sufficient influence within the Church to turn that spearpoint himself. But that was still merely hypothetical.

Holo reached out to stroke Col's cheek and then gave it a pinch. When she spoke, it was to Lawrence. "What will we need?"

"First, an accurate map of the northlands. Having learned a place-name, it'll do us no good if we don't know where that place actually is, and we won't know where war is spreading, either. And while it's not exactly a minor detail, we may find more news of the wolf bone in the process."

Holo nodded and took a deep breath.

"That's why I had Mr. Huskins give me the name of someone who could give us news of the north and draw us a proper map. And since he knows the truth about the wolf among us, I expect the introduction will be a good one," said Lawrence jokingly.

Holo only sniffed, unamused, while the guileless Col nodded. This was what Lawrence had told Holo when they'd greeted the morning at the abbey.

He could gather information and take her back to her homelands, as he had first promised, but any heroics that might follow—such as ruining the Debau Company's plans—were beyond his ability to guarantee.

Their opponent was a great trading company that controlled the mines of the north. It was a world that would take more than mere money to navigate. Getting Brondel Abbey to sell a holy relic to the Jean Company was only one small part of the Debau Company's goal.

When he had learned this from Huskins, before feelings of

resentment set in, Lawrence had been simply amazed at the ridiculous breadth of the world.

His own influence had its limits, and traveling merchants were generally a powerless lot. But Holo did not blame him for that, so Lawrence felt no shame.

He would do what he could. And what he could do, he would do to the absolute best of his ability.

"In any case, we'll return to Kerube. There we'll meet with a certain merchant."

Kerube had been consumed with the narwhal disturbance. Holo put the question to him with a look of distaste. "Not to that runt that caused you so much fuss surely?"

"You mean Kieman? No. A merchant who's one of Huskins's friends."

At Lawrence's answer, Holo's expression turned still sourer. "We're relying on the power of sheep yet again...?"

"It's not a shepherd this time. That's got to be some sort of improvement."

Holo was not a high-handed noblewoman. It was true she did possess a certain measure of pride, but it was a childlike vanity and stubbornness that she often employed, which she herself would readily admit.

Lawrence did not expect a reply to his statement, but he got one.

"If not a shepherd, what then?"

Lawrence's answer was simple. "An art seller."

Just as rivers divide one nation from another, the climates on opposite sides of even a narrow sea channel can be very different. Different enough that letters exchanged across it often give rise to jokes that summer and winter come at opposite times.

While the port town of Kerube was still cold, it was not icily so. But if one crossed the river that flowed through the town and

headed north, the scenery would soon turn a pure white that was not so very different from Winfiel. The world was a strange place.

"So will we disembark on the north side? Or the south?" asked Holo with tired eyes from underneath the blanket as they rode within the ship. She had started drinking wine not long before, insisting that it was too cold not to.

Lawrence put his hand on Holo's head and idly brushed her bangs aside before answering. "The south. The livelier side."

The town of Kerube was divided down the middle by a river. On the north side lived the original inhabitants of the town, while the south was full of more recently arrived merchants. The livelier half was the south, where the merchants were.

"Mmm. I suppose... I'll be able to look forward to a tasty dinner, then," Holo said, yawning as she spoke, then smacking her lips. Lawrence wondered what sort of feast she saw at the end of her gaze.

Thinking of the contents of his coin purse, he replied with a bit of a jab, "Joking aside, how many sheep might we have had?"

Huskins was employed as a shepherd at Brondel Abbey, and he had offered over and over to quietly give them several head of fine sheep.

"Mm...'twould have been no small trouble to bring them with us."

"I never would have thought you'd play the realist."

Sheep were costly, and those chosen by the golden sheep Huskins himself would surely leave nothing to be desired. But they had not accepted his offer for exactly the reason Holo had just stated.

When Lawrence turned Huskins down, Holo had clearly been displeased, but even then she had understood.

"I can manage that much, at least," said Holo. "After all, our pack is already..." Using their belongings for a pillow, Holo lay

under a blanket. Lawrence's hand was on her head, and from underneath it she looked up at him mischievously. She did not finish her sentence, though, either out of kindness or having decided it was more trouble than it was worth.

"How about you sleep quietly, like Col?"

Col was afraid of traveling by ship, and after a swallow of wine had slept soundly by Lawrence's other side.

At Lawrence's words, Holo slowly closed her eyes and answered, "I don't fear ships, but wine. If I could but sleep I could escape the fear, but to do that I fear I need to drink more."

An old joke, one often directed at the clergy, who were prohibited from drinking. What made Holo so frightening was not that she knew the joke, but that she was able to seem like she truly meant it.

"I fear the cost of food, so I've nothing to drink but my tears," said Lawrence.

There was no reply from the perhaps unamused Holo.

Some time later, the ship arrived as planned in Kerube.

By the time Lawrence woke Col, and grumbling, Holo got to her feet, Lawrence and company were the only ones left in the ship's hold.

"Ngh... whew. 'Tis been but a few days, but this feels strangely nostalgic," said Holo once they left the ship and found themselves standing in the south side of the town. Having been swept up in the chaos that threatened to divide the town in two, perhaps it had left a deeper-than-usual impression on them.

"Could be because the snowy scenery of Winfiel is so different from things here. But you're right." Lawrence divided their luggage between himself and Col and then held the hem of Holo's cloak down to keep her tail from showing as she stretched. "This is the first time we've returned to a town we've already visited."

"Mm? Oh, aye. Now that you mention it, 'tis so."

After the sad state of Winfiel, it was even easier to appreciate the constant hustle and bustle of Kerube. For all those who made their lives by trade, a lively marketplace was best.

"Indeed, it does feel as though we've been traveling together for a terribly long time."

"Hmm?"

Holo narrowed her eyes and looked around, then clasped her hands behind her and started to walk forward. "And every time we enter a new town, something worth laughing about for fifty years seems to happen."

Something about her form seemed terribly lonely, and Lawrence was sure it was not just his imagination. If Holo was to laugh at these memories fifty years from now, he would not be by her side to join her.

"..."

When Lawrence failed to muster any response, Holo turned around to face him. "So then, shall we add another happy memory to our travels?"

Lawrence looked past Holo, where beneath the eaves of a shop, eels were being fried in oil.

Having left their things at a trading house, Lawrence went to Kieman, who had written him an introduction letter, to tell him in an innocuous way about recent events there.

Kieman, amused, listened all the while and, in lieu of a reply, held out a letter sent to the trading company some days earlier from a town farther south that was famous for its furs.

The letter contained but a single sentence: "We profited." Lawrence was sure that if he put his nose to the paper, he would catch the scent of a wolf—but that wolf was not Holo.

He did not need to ask who the letter was from.

"An art seller? Oh, perhaps you mean the Hugues Company."



"Yes, I'd like to meet with Hafner Hugues."

"If you simply head out the front entrance of the trading house and down the street, it will be on your right. They've a signboard with a picture of a ram's horn hanging from the eaves, so they're hard to miss."

Lawrence smiled wryly at that detail—it was a bold sign to have, given that Hugues was one of Huskins's kind.

"Still, it's unusual that you would have business with the Hugues Company."

Art was the purview of the wealthy and powerful, so it was rare for a traveling merchant like Lawrence to walk into an art seller's company. As someone concerned with the reputation of the Rowen Trade Guild, Kieman was undoubtedly worried that Lawrence was again involved in something strange.

Lawrence probably could not sweep those worries away, but Kieman might know something useful, so Lawrence replied even as he held no particular expectations. "I hope to meet with a silversmith named Fran Vonely."

Huskins had given him the name, and when Kieman heard it, his face was the very image of surprise.

"Do you know her?" Lawrence asked.

Kieman rubbed his face to erase the shock, then smiled faintly. "She's famous. Or perhaps I should say notorious."

What was that supposed to mean? Lawrence quickly looked around, wordlessly pressing Kieman to continue.

"It's her clientele."

Kieman's eyes in that moment seemed to evidence more worry for Lawrence than they did concern about speaking ill of Fran Vonely.

"She's celebrated for having such high patrons for such a young silversmith, but those patrons are all newly wealthy, and most of them have dark shadows in their pasts. And she won't hear

questions about where she apprenticed or who her master was. She's very mysterious."

Kieman's information sources were like a spiderweb over the land, so his words were undoubtedly true.

What sort of person was she?

As Lawrence mused, Kieman said one last thing. "I think you'd be better off avoiding her."

Within their organization, the difference between Kieman and Lawrence was like that between heaven and earth. If Kieman made a suggestion, it was meant as an order. And yet as Kieman's pen danced over his ledger book, he murmured one last thing.

"Ah, seems I've been thinking aloud again." A deliberate smile flickered across his features; it seemed he really did intend the warning as well-meaning advice.

Lawrence bowed to Kieman and then hurried to leave the trading house, where Holo and Col awaited him.

As he went, Kieman offered one final statement without looking up from his ledger. "Let me know when you've profit to divide."

It seemed presumptive to think of Kieman as a friend, but they did share a friendly sort of tie, Lawrence felt. "But of course," he said with a smile before putting the trading house behind him.

"Did things go well?" asked a worried Col. And no wonder—normally it would be distasteful to even meet the eye of someone whose greed had caused the trouble for them that Kieman's had.

But in all the world, none were so ready to put grudges behind them and drink with onetime enemies as merchants were.

Lawrence patted Col on the head. "Seems they got a letter. 'We profited,' it said."

Col's face lit up; he had always liked and worried about Eve. And Eve, too, seemed to be fond of Col.

The only displeased one was Holo.

"I only pray this doesn't mean that more misfortune awaits us."

She was no doubt referring both to Eve—who had once actually tried to kill Lawrence—as well as Fran Vonely and the warning from Kieman.

As far as they had heard, she would be a troublesome person to deal with.

Lawrence gave Holo a look that said, "You're hardly one to talk."

Holo sniffed in irritation. "So where are these art sellers to be found?" The obviousness of her ill temper made clear she was not really unhappy at all. When Lawrence started walking, she immediately followed.

Once she saw the signboard that hung from the eaves of the Hugues Company, she fought back a wry smile. "I'm not sure whether they're gutless or bold."

"Probably for the same reason you see so many eagles on the nobility's family crests," said Lawrence, opening the shop's door, which was simply made but finely carved and had likely cost a good sum. Immediately his nose was hit by the smell of paint.

The shop was on the small side for one on such a busy street, but Lawrence was immediately struck by how profitable it probably was. There was no small number of paintings hanging on every wall, and they all had one thing in common.

They were large.

In general, it was neither the subject nor the artist of a painting that determined its price. Most of a painting's price was in the paint itself, and so it was the size and color quality of a piece that decided its value.

Every painting in this little shop was large and had been rendered in many vivid colors. They were undoubtedly worth a significant amount.

"Ho..."

Some of the paintings depicted God or the Holy Mother, while others showed saints in reclusion, in mountains and forests, in caves and by ponds. In each case, the backgrounds seemed more prominent than the subjects, as though the artists had cared more about them than God or the Holy Mother.

"Perhaps no one's home."

Holo seemed impressed, and her breath quickened. Col was silent. Lawrence ignored them and went farther into the shop—but not before turning around and giving Holo a stern warning. "Don't touch the paintings."

Holo's cheeks immediately puffed out in irritation at being scolded like a child, but she did indeed have a finger raised and pointed at the face of one of the paintings. If she touched it and left a mark, they would all have to beat a hasty retreat.

"Excuse me! Is anyone here?" Lawrence called out into the shop, which elicited the slam of a closing door. There seemed to be someone in the storeroom.

Lawrence heard a muffled reply and gazed at one of the paintings on the wall as he waited for the shopkeeper to emerge. It was a painting of a group of pilgrims on their journey. They were walking alongside a river, on the opposite side of which was a lush forest and grand mountain range.

The man who finally emerged from the back of the shop looked more like a pig than a sheep. "Yes, yes, how may I help you?"

A glance at the flat cap on his head called to mind a clergyman, but he was dressed in fine merchant's clothes.

"I'm here to see Mr. Hafner Hugues."

"Oh? Well, I'm Hafner. So... how might I be of assistance?"

Lawrence was obviously a traveling merchant, and his companions were equally obvious as a nun and a rescued street urchin. None of them were the usual clientele for an art seller who catered to the wealthy.

"Actually, I was sent by Mr. Huskins from Brondel Abbey..."

That was as far as Lawrence got.

Hugues's piglike nose twitched, and his eyes were fixed in a corner of the room.

Holo noticed his gaze and looked up from a picture of the Holy Mother holding an apple.

Holo was small, but she was still a wolf.

"Ah...ah...ah..."

"Her name is Holo," said Lawrence, smiling brilliantly at the terrified Hugues.

But Hugues did not have the wherewithal to listen. He seemed ready to flee but unable to make his legs move, and he gazed at Holo as though poleaxed.

It was Holo who moved.

Without so much as a sigh, she walked right up to him. "I don't suppose you have any apples like the one in that painting?"

When surrounded by a pack of wild dogs in the forest, about the only thing one can do is pull out a piece of jerky and throw it as far as possible.

The effect was immediate. Hugues nodded so quickly his fleshy cheeks jiggled before he immediately disappeared into the rear of the shop.

"He's more pig than sheep, I'd say," mused Holo as she watched him go.

Holo reached without hesitation for an apple from the wooden bowl full of them that was produced. Despite being the master of this shop, Hugues seemed stuck as he stood in the corner.

"Mr. Hugues."

His large body tried to shrink into itself at the sound of Lawrence's voice. Lawrence tried to offer him a chair, no longer certain just who was the master and who was the customer here.

"We heard of this place from Mr. Huskins, you see."

Hugues's hand was busy wiping the sweat from his brow as he stared at the apples, but hearing this he froze. He looked up at Lawrence desperately, as though begging for mercy.

Munching away on her apple, Holo chose that moment to interject. "Now he... was a tough fellow." She looked at Hugues with one teasing eye. It was not that he was a sheep that annoyed her so, but his simple cowardice.

And yet she probably would have been annoyed in a different way if he had not shown fear. Wolves are complicated creatures.

"Tough. Sinewy, you know."

"He was a sturdy fellow, indeed," added Lawrence to Holo's unnecessary words.

"Wh-what did you do... no, what did you want with him?" Had he possessed a bit more courage, perhaps he would have asked, "What did you do to him?"

But he surely saw the fangs in Holo's mouth as she chewed her apple. Wolves and sheep are in inherent conflict. Since time immemorial, one has been the eater and the other the eaten, and so would it continue.

"We listened to his tale of what his kind had done at the abbey. It was a grand tale, too. And then we gave him some assistance."

"... Why did he—why did he send you to me?"

"We are looking for someone who knows the northlands."

Strength seemed to be returning gradually to Hugues's eyes. As an art seller, he had unquestionably been successful, so he was certainly superior to Lawrence, a human and a traveling merchant.

"Ah... yes. In that case...," Hugues said, but stumbled over the *however* he wanted to say next and looked at Holo meaningfully.

Holo had devoured five or six apples and licked her fingers as though her hunger had been temporarily sated. She spoke only

after she had finished licking her index and ring fingers all the way down to their base. "That one, Huskins, he had some backbone. He knew the way of things."

"..."

Hugues said nothing, not even taking a breath as he looked at Holo.

"What I mean is, he made sure to properly repay his debt to us. But as to whether it'll truly be paid..." She glanced at him. "...That'll depend on your cooperation."

"That's..." Hugues swallowed as though trying to choke something down and then continued, "Of course...if that's what he wants, then..."

"Mm." Holo gave Lawrence's arm a light poke, as though to say, "It's up to you now."

"So then, Mr. Hugues. We were hoping you would make an introduction for us."

"Ah...yes, indeed, this company deals in art, and many artists travel widely. So..."

"Yes, we heard the name of a certain silversmith from Mr. Huskins."

In that moment, Hugues's face finally belonged to a proper art seller. And in the same moment, Holo transformed from a girl blithely eating apples into a wolf.

"Mr. Huskins gave us the name Fran Vonely."

Wrinkles appeared on Hugues's soft forehead. He had the peculiar facial expression common to all merchants when their most profitable secret is discovered. But Hugues had been a merchant for a long time, and as such, he knew all too well of treating any visitors who were sent by someone as important as Huskins.

"I am...aware of her."

"I hear she is a remarkable silversmith."

Hugues gave a pained nod in response to Lawrence's statement. "She makes her living with painting, but her true trade is as a silversmith. I don't know how she's managed it, but she's close to many important figures, and to a one they're infatuated with her skill... especially those who've made their fortunes by the spear and shield, if you..."

For an art dealer like Hugues, she would be like the golden goose. He could've gone on at length.

Lawrence cleared his throat. "Could you introduce us to her?"

No one wanted to let a competitor get close to their golden goose. Lawrence certainly understood the feeling—particularly when it was an unknown traveling merchant, a poverty-stricken urchin boy, and a wolf spirit. He could hardly be blamed for imagining himself being devoured headfirst.

It was obvious that Hugues was weighing Huskins's debt, his own profit, and his personal safety against each other.

Holo then put a finger on that scale. "Yoitsu."

"Huh?" Hugues looked at her.

"Yoitsu. 'Tis an old name. Few still remember it. And those who remember where it is are still fewer."

Perhaps Hugues's mouth was dry, as he was now constantly trying to swallow.

"I seek my homelands. Yoitsu. So, what say you? Have you heard of it?"

Holo was behaving poorly, it was true. But it was clear that she had become tired of keeping up appearances for their own sake.

"If you know, I want you to tell me. Just look at me."

Holo seemed small, and her head was bowed. If her tail had been bared, it surely would have been drooping between her legs.

"Ah... er, well..."

It was enough to surprise even Lawrence, and Hugues was well past surprise and on into shock. He finally stood from his

chair and flapped his mouth as though trying to say something to Lawrence and Col.

It was true that engaging in a real negotiation would have been bothersome, but there seemed to be a basic change in Holo's attitude.

In Winfiel, she had learned just how naive she truly was, and this from a sheep, an animal she had taken every opportunity to deride. And here she was not making high-handed demands, but simply asking for information.

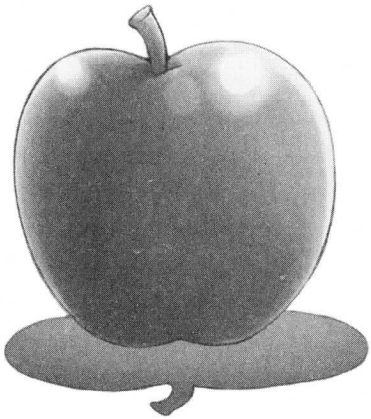
And while Hugues might not have been a courageous man, he was a generous one.

"P-please look up. If the old one's sent you... no, rather, if you'll go to such humbling lengths for me, then, come—I, too, was born as a sheep. And I will aid you. So please..."

Raise your head.

At these last words, Holo slowly looked up and smiled. And perhaps it was strange to think it of someone who had lived as many centuries as Holo had, but it still seemed to Lawrence that her smile was just a bit more grown-up.

CHAPTER TWO



Hugues offered warmed wine instead of apples. "It'll warm you. Please, help yourself."

Lawrence gave his thanks and brought it to his lips, and Holo did likewise. He doubted she would like it and stole a glance at her. Col was the only one who had been given warm goat's milk, and seeing Holo eye him enviously was rather entertaining.

"Now then, you want to know about Fran Vonely, the silversmith, do you?"

"Yes."

Lawrence got the feeling that Hugues still had something left to say, and soon he came to a conclusion and replied, "She's in town right now as a matter of fact."

Holo smiled an obviously unfriendly smile, which Lawrence had to admit he understood. Still, it was no surprise that Hugues was trying to protect his asset.

Lawrence lightly patted Holo's knee before turning his attention back to Hugues. "Doing painting or smithing, I suppose?"

"No. She often travels here or there saying she's making preparations for just that, but just when I was thinking I hadn't heard

from her in some time, she comes wandering in, saying she's heard tell of a certain legend."

"A legend?" said Lawrence, as though to make sure he had heard correctly, which made Hugues nod.

"Something about a village known as Taussig. It's up next to a long, wide mountain range in the north. The mountains are tall, the forests deep, and she's come in pursuit of a legend regarding a lake in the area, she said."

Hearing the words *mountain*, *forest*, and *lake*, Lawrence looked at his companion.

But Holo did not look back, and instead his eyes met Col's, who was sitting on the other side of her.

"Mr. Hugues, do you know anything about this legend?"

"Certainly, I've heard tell of it. As I'm sure you're aware, we have our own information sources, and to a certain degree we can tell whether such things are real or not..."

"So you're saying there's a good chance it's a fake?"

Hugues nodded. "But she's a stubborn person. Once she's decided on a shape for a silver piece, she won't budge—although many people find such vehemence to have a certain charm to it..."

"So she won't have time to draw us a map?"

"Perhaps not. Though..."

"Though...?" Lawrence prompted, which made Hugues reply with regret in his voice.

"It's true that she often journeys into the north in search of subjects for her silversmithing, and I imagine that she's become more familiar with the old names of places there than old Huskins or myself are, since she's the only one actually going there."

Lawrence nodded and urged Hugues to continue. What he had said so far did not answer Lawrence's question.

"So, yes. But I don't know if she'll simply draw you a map if

asked to. I had to work very hard in order to establish a relationship with her, so..." Hugues wiped the sweat from his face. Assuming it was not an act on his part, Fran Vonely was indeed a difficult person to get along with.

"What? 'Twill be simply done," Holo said, casually baring her fangs at the rattled Hugues. All they had to do was threaten her—was that the joke?

Hugues smiled, but not out of amusement at the jest. Crafters were a famously stubborn lot. There were stories of legendary blacksmiths who had been unwilling, been driven to the verge of poverty, licking rust from their anvil to stave off starvation, rather than forge a sword they did not want to forge.

It would be foolhardy of Lawrence to just show up one day and ask her to draw them a map of the northlands.

"I understand entirely," said Lawrence. "But would you be able to put in a good word for us?"

Hugues nearly fell forward at Lawrence's question. Perhaps it made Lawrence's firm resolve all too clear.

"She—she's a very difficult individual, you see..."

It would be difficult to convince her to meet someone she did not already know. Lawrence contemplated the problem.

Hugues was torn between maintaining his relationship with a particular silversmith or doing right by Huskins, who kept the haven for sheep spirits like Hugues. In weighing one against the other, he was leaning toward the silversmith.

Had they not gotten whatever sign from Huskins they needed in order to obtain Hugues's cooperation? Or was he just not a very duty-bound person?

Or—was Fran Vonely a silversmith of such ability?

It was not beyond Lawrence's ability to reason this out. Neither was it difficult for an art seller of Hugues's ability to guess at what Lawrence was thinking during his short silence.

If Hugues displeased Vonely, then he would be facing something even more dangerous than Holo.

In a pleadingly serious tone, Hugues began to speak.

"The reason I'm so loathe to displease her is related to my trade. But it's not about money."

Trade was always carried out to seek money. Lawrence's curious gaze fell upon Hugues, who seemed to gather his resolve. He stood and walked over to one of the paintings on the way.

"The place in this painting was once called Dira long ago."

It was one of the largest paintings in the room and depicted a jagged, craggy landscape. Standing before a bare cliff was a single hermit, both hands raised to the heavens as though in prayer. It seemed to be a depiction of the legend of Dira's patron saint.

Such paintings were common. But as far as Lawrence knew, pieces where the setting was more of a focus than the subject were unusual.

As the thought occurred to him, Hugues said something unexpected. "This is my homeland."

"—!" Lawrence felt Holo stiffen beside him.

"But long ago it was a fertile, productive place. Without any of these rocks. That cliff... is a claw mark."

Holo's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Of the Moon-Hunting Bear?"

"Yes. It is something that my kind will never forget. These paintings were created with the help of individuals like Miss Vonely. It has been decades now. For the sake of my kind and those similar to me, I collect and deal in such pieces, pieces that show the homes we were forced to abandon or the disaster that made returning home impossible. It would be a lie to suggest that I have not profited in doing so, but that is a secondary concern."

Hugues gazed into the scene of the painting as though through a great window.

"And even the landscape of this painting is now no more. I hear that veins of gold were discovered there... It's ironic, actually. The guide I hired in order to have this piece made found the gold. And even if that hadn't happened, wind and water would wear the land away until it's entirely different. The paintings in the other room and the paintings hanging in churches and manors, too, mostly show landscapes that have disappeared or are in the process of disappearing. And the paintings themselves will not last forever."

Hugues touched the frame of one of the pieces, gazing at it for a while after he had finished speaking.

This was a place where tiny pieces of vanishing worlds were stored for safekeeping. The passage of time might seem slow to humans, but to his kind it was surely too fast. Their memories of the past were all that remained, and the gap between it and the present grew ever larger.

Hugues suddenly looked back at Lawrence with a troubled smile. His gaze was probably directed at Holo, but Lawrence did not turn to check. He knew that doing so would surely hurt Holo's feelings.

The only one who could speak to Holo of this was Hugues, who had lived as long as she had.

"If possible, I would like very much to help you. This place does not exist only for we sheep. My customers have included deer and hares, foxes and fowl as well."

Lawrence heard the sound of rustling cloth as Holo shifted. He would not ask what she had done.

"However, Fran Vonely's knowledge and skill are irreplaceable. She has a perfect memory, never forgetting anything she's seen even once, and a sense of purpose she holds more dear than her own life. She is utterly dedicated to capturing the landscape in her art, and I cannot afford to lose her cooperation. There is no time."

The energy in Hugues's eyes was not something that one would

see in someone who worked solely for his own profit. The evidence of the life that he and his kind had lived was inexorably disappearing, and he was engaged in the work of trying to preserve a record.

Lawrence dwelled on Hugues's last words. *"There is no time"*—did he mean that the landscape was vanishing too quickly?

"There's no time?"

"Yes. We must hurry. There are a multitude of places I hope Miss Vonely will paint, but her lifetime is limited. I think about it often—if only she could live as long as we."

Lawrence doubted he was the only one to make a surprised sound at this revelation. He had assumed that Fran Vonely was a special being, like Holo and Hugues. That led him to consider the obvious next question: If time was such a concern, why didn't he and his kind simply do the paintings themselves?

"Like you, I'm meant to be a merchant," said Hugues.

Lawrence realized that he had been scratching his head in confusion, and Hugues had likely guessed at what he was thinking.

Hugues looked down, then sighed, smiling. He looked at the paintings on the walls and narrowed his eyes. "I understand what you want to say. And in all honestly, we did once take up the brush...and those comrades of mine who went north and east and captured the old landscapes in the south, landscapes that are now long gone...those comrades of mine were not immortal."

Holo was the wolf spirit who lived in the wheat, and Lawrence remembered her words—that if the wheat in which she lived disappeared, she too would be gone. And she herself had a natural life span.

But Lawrence could not imagine that Hugues was talking about natural life spans.

Hugues's quiet eyes regarded him. They were the deep, placid eyes of a wise and ancient man.

"They took up their brushes and traveled abroad, carefully observing the state of the world out of a deep sense of duty. And what they found were forests cleared, rivers dammed and changed, and mountains dug up and scarred. Eventually they could stand it no longer and traded their brushes for swords."

Lawrence had heard this story before. He glanced at Col, who listened raptly to Hugues's tale.

"But they were outnumbered. One was burned by the Church, another crushed by an army. One was so mortified by his own powerlessness that he...well. Few remain even as memories, having vanished like so much sea-foam. Humans, they...ah, apologies."

"Not at all," Lawrence answered, at which Hugues displayed a sad smile.

"Humans have amassed great power. Control of the world has been theirs for a long time now, and our age has passed. Those unwilling to admit that have one by one fallen in battle and now exist only as legends on parchment. And even those parchments are crumbling, mice nibbled and moth eaten. We are what remains: sheep, in the human sense of sheep. None of us, myself included, have the courage to hold a brush. The bravest of us were the first to fall...It was a terrible cruelty."

Lawrence understood all too well why Hugues was more concerned with Fran Vonely, a human, over his fellow sheep Huskins or Holo the wolf. Hugues and his fellows had surely not revealed their true nature to her.

If so, there were not many ways they could keep her close. To have her create paintings for them, they would bow down before her, avoid any offense, and hear any demand, no matter how unreasonable.

Even admitting her existence to Lawrence was clearly a great compromise on Hugues's part.

"It is indeed cruel," said Holo, sipping the sour wine Lawrence was sure she did not like. "So that is why you were so upset upon seeing me, was it?"

Lawrence looked at Holo, and Col did likewise.

While birds and foxes had visited the sheep, perhaps a wolf never had. Wolves had fangs, claws, and the courage to use them. They would have been the first to turn to violence.

And they would have been the first to die.

Hugues looked evenly back at Holo and then slowly nodded. "Yes. Even so."

"Heh. But 'tis well. I would have been sadder to learn of the opposite."

It was because such courage suited her that Holo had earned the name Wisewolf. It was in this moment that Hugues ceased to seem fearful of her.

"...I envy such strength. For my part, I've often wondered if I'm to live so long, why I couldn't have been born as a stone or tree instead."

At the end of the conversation, Holo began to speak without any inhibition. "Heh. I cannot say I feel the same. Were I a stone or tree, I could hardly travel with these two."

Hugues smiled. "Indeed. Life in the world of humans can be rather enjoyable."

"Mm. They're an amusing lot."

Yet Lawrence could not help but feel that it surely had not been an accident that the wine they were offered was not very sweet.

Gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, lead, brass, stone.

The phrase *gems hidden in the earth* was a common one, but sometimes it could be hard to tell what was valuable and what was not.

As Lawrence and company waited for Fran to return from her

wandering about town, Hugues showed them around his storeroom. It contained not just paintings but a wealth of fine crafts and ornaments that had been sold off to Hugues alongside those paintings.

"There are many fakes here, but...ah, here's a bar meant for holding down scrolls. Mm, looks like it's only gold plated, though. Ah yes, here! What do you make of this one, eh?"

Hafner Hugues, master of the storehouse, seemed not to know exactly what it contained, as he weighed the gold bar in his hand and made his pronouncement.

Hugues had told Holo about Fran because Holo was a being similar to himself, but he was still a sheep spirit and a merchant as well. He had to get some value from this transaction.

He led Holo and Col to the back of the storehouse, as they wanted to know whether he had any paintings of Holo's homeland of Yoitsu, but as he did so, he kept a close eye on Lawrence. A traveling merchant who wandered from nation to nation did not have much purchasing power, but he made up for that in knowledge and fresh information. No doubt Hugues wanted to know if any of the dusty old pieces in his storeroom were unexpectedly valuable. Lawrence felt like a pig trained to sniff for truffles.

It was true that demand varied from town to town—in one town, anything with a wolf motif would sell, while in another, the color of gold would be so coveted that even gold-plated items would fly off the shelves. Given the occasion, Lawrence was only too happy to spill everything he had heard about towns whose conditions might be good.

Such a town might as well be drunk. Absurd items would sell on the spot, and given the amount of junk in Hugues's storeroom, it was like a golden trash barrel.

"Well, that's about the size of it."

"I see, I see. I'm deeply grateful, yes. While I do hear stories

from all over while I sit in my shop here, most of my visitors aren't walking the path of trade, so I collect little information that's useful in business."

Even as he spoke, Hugues took notes with a quill pen in the margins of an old bill of receipt. Assuming his high spirits were not a ruse, he seemed to think they would lead him to a healthy profit.

Holo would scowl if Hugues had asked her, but Lawrence was a merchant.

As he considered such thoughts, his eyes were drawn by a single item in the piles of junk.

"...Is this...?"

"Oh, so this is where I left that old thing."

Lawrence pulled the item out from between two wooden crates, and Hugues reached for it, smiling merrily.

Lawrence could not begin to imagine what the thing was for. He handed it to Hugues. It was a golden apple; Holo would surely laugh to see it.

"What in the world is this used for?"

"Oh, it's one of those—you use it to warm your hands."

"Your hands?"

In response, Hugues handed the apple back to Lawrence, who noticed that it was indeed a bit warmer than it had been a moment earlier.

"It's for merchants who want to show off their wealth a bit. You can heat it by the fireplace or have your apprentice warm it with his skin, then use it to warm your hands as you do your writing. Though anybody who dares use it outside when traveling in the winter will find their hands sticking to it."

Hugues was quite right. Still, Lawrence had no trouble imagining Holo curling her body around the trinket while riding in the wagon, like a hen protecting her egg. He found himself thinking

it might be rather useful, but then quickly snapped out of it and shook his head.

This was no time to be distracted by such silly items.

Lawrence returned the apple to Hugues.

"Still, thank you ever so much for the information," said a pleased Hugues, who had nearly blackened the margins of the bill of receipt with notes, careful not to leave as much as a single detail out.

"Not at all. Thank *you*."

"By all means, when you're finished, feel free to linger. You're most welcome here." Hugues sounded like an ordinary merchant now.

Lawrence smiled, nodded, and shook his hand.

"Though it seems Master Col and Miss Holo are still looking at the paintings." Hugues had to exert himself to bring his round body to his feet, and he then peered farther into the back of the storeroom.

Holo was flipping through a stand of paintings one by one, chattering with Col about this and that.

Hugues fell suddenly silent as he watched her. Lawrence had a good guess at what he was thinking about.

"Might I ask how you're all related?" It was a reasonable thing to wonder about.

Holo should have overheard, but she gave no evidence of it.

Lawrence decided that there was no reason to hide it, so he answered as he walked over. "My trading route generally covered lands farther south. I happened to meet Holo at one of my stops there."

"I see."

"Holo had been asked a favor by a friend long ago—that she would guarantee bountiful harvests of the wheat in a certain town. But over time the village forgot about her, and she decided

to return home. My wagon happened to be passing by, and she simply hopped in and stowed away."

Hugues smiled, amused, but there was a coolly calculating quality that showed through. Holo's story was not irrelevant to his own experience.

"But it had been some several centuries since she'd left her homelands, and so she doesn't know where they are. So we've been traveling here and there in search of them. We met Col on the way. He's from a town in the north called Pinu."

"Oh, Pinu?" Hugues's eyes widened in surprise, and he looked over his shoulder at Holo and Col. "That's quite far away. Ah... but I see now why old Huskins would have told you of Fran Vonely."

Lawrence gave Huskins a deliberate smile. There was nothing amusing about the story, but if he failed to tell it with a smile, Holo seemed likely to be angry.

"The northlands are a place of invasion and conquest. The place-names are always changing. It might be that I do know this Yoitsu of yours; I simply know it by a different name."

Lawrence nodded but was shocked at what Hugues said next.

"When you said you wanted a map of the north, I thought for sure you were involved with the conflict up there." Hugues was speaking in jest, but seeing Lawrence's reaction, he, too, was stunned. "Ah... er... you're not, are you?"

"Are you referring to the events surrounding the Debau Company? So the rumors are true, are they?"

No doubt Hugues collected information along with paintings. And this was the destination of the river that flowed right through the Debau Company's front door.

"Er, no, I... if you want to know whether it's true, the fact is that I have no good evidence. It's a place constantly awash in unpleasant rumors."

"What do you yourself believe, Mr. Hugues?"

Hugues's troubled expression was that of a man whose joke had been taken seriously. He seemed to give up on trying to escape and reluctantly opened his mouth. "The simple truth is that... I have no interest in it."

Lawrence thought he must have misheard. "You have no interest?"

"That's right. More than a few of us are simply plugging our ears and closing our eyes to the tale, just as we did with the Moon-Hunting Bear. They'll mine what they can mine, and when they're done, they'll leave. In any case, scenery is not eternal. Though the landscape might change completely, the land itself will not simply disappear from the earth, so..."

Even a placid sheep, who only occasionally looked up from its grass eating to regard the scenery around it with its black eyes, could see the way of the world.

It would be easy to curse Hugues for being a coward. But there was a certain truth to his thinking, and he could hardly be blamed for his realistic outlook.

One saw all sorts of things during travel.

Villages beset by mercenaries, towns suffering bitter feuds between landlords. There was nothing to be gained in opposition, and they were powerless to begin with. The only answer was to hold still and hope the storm would pass.

"That's why I've never tried to learn anything more about it. I'm not strong like old Huskins, and if I knew more, it would only worry me. Just as it worries you and Miss Holo and young Col."

Hugues smiled fractionally at this small joke, a signal that he was hoping to end the discussion of this particular topic.

It was true—the more one knew, the more one *wanted* to know, and the more detailed the knowledge, the stronger the urge to interfere. It was difficult to argue with the wisdom of someone who had endured cataclysms.

Lawrence had no right to disturb Hugues's life, and Holo would surely feel the same way. "I apologize for asking."

"Not at all. I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help. So then, will you be returning to your room?" inquired Hugues.

Lawrence looked at Holo, who raised her head and shook it "no," then pointed to Col. The boy was busily looking through a stack of paintings. Evidently they still had searching left to do.

"I'll be returning on my own."

"I see. Might I offer you something warm to drink in the parlor?"

As a merchant, Lawrence was surprised at these words. This storeroom contained a great many valuable paintings, as well as examples of gold- and silversmithing. To leave perfect strangers unattended in such a room was an act of significant courage, Lawrence reflexively thought. Hugues noticed this and smiled.

"If she wanted to steal from me, it would be faster for her to simply bite my head off. And anyway, we forest dwellers don't lie."

It would have sounded as if he was trying to flatter Holo, but perhaps that was reading too much into it.

Lawrence bowed his head politely. "Ah, my apologies."

Hugues chatted with Lawrence for a while before retreating to the rear of his shop to work.

Lawrence sat in the room waiting for Fran, reading through the travel account of a merchant who claimed to have journeyed the world over and found a city of gold in the Far East. But just like the information that Lawrence had sought from Hugues, the knowledge that could be gathered in a trip around the world would be incredibly valuable if true, and therefore making it public would be the height of idiocy. In other words, the travel account was merely nonsense, but it was amusing nonsense.

Just as Lawrence found himself laughing at the absurdity of one

of the more improbable details, a golden something flew through the space between his eye and the book and landed in his lap.

He looked up in surprise, and there was Holo, looking as though she had dropped something. His eyes were next drawn to the dropped object in his lap—it was the golden apple he had been so amused to discover in the storeroom.

"Was it not tasty?" He picked the apple up. It was warm.

Size-wise it seemed just about a fit for Holo's hand, he thought, whereupon that same hand snatched it away from him.

"You humans do love your gold. Though 'twould be a bother if everything turned to gold."

Too much of a good thing, went the old saying. But Lawrence was a merchant. "In that case, find something that's not gold, and sell it high."

Holo sniffed and then sat down beside him, looking displeased. She did not groom her tail; she simply toyed with the golden apple in her hands.

"Where's Col?" Lawrence asked, which made Holo tilt her head.

Her ears were flattened, which did not suggest anything good about her mood. She had probably left him in the storeroom. It was a rare state of events, and Lawrence could not imagine many possibilities.

"Couldn't find anything, eh?" Any paintings of Yoitsu, or its region, or any landscape that Holo remembered.

No doubt she had thought that with so many paintings, surely at least one of them would hold what she sought.

Her disappointment would not have been so great if she had thought from the beginning that nothing would turn up. What stung was having hopes dashed.

Worse, they had surely found many landscapes that Col recognized.

"Mm." Holo held the golden apple in both hands and nodded faintly.

"That just means you've still something to look forward to, eh?" Lawrence knew he would rouse her anger by saying so, and indeed, her ears pricked up.

But that did not last long. The strength slowly slipped from her, and the words came tumbling out of her mouth like water from an uncorked bottle. "Is it... wrong of me?"

"Wrong?" Lawrence repeated, at which Holo nodded.

"Like those sheep, Hugues said. Most of them plugged their ears and shut their eyes..."

Lawrence looked away from Holo momentarily and closed the book. It was a delightful, beautifully bound volume. No doubt the name of the raconteur merchant responsible would be remembered for centuries.

"You mean about wanting to get involved after hearing the truth?" asked Lawrence, which Holo nodded at.

Holo seemed cold and calculating but was quite hot-blooded, and whenever she saw someone suffering or in trouble, she wanted to help. If humans were to assemble and march upon the forests and mounts, ravaging the land and killing the animals, she would want to help the resistance even if the land weren't Yoitsu.

And while the outcome might well be recorded in legend and song, victory was surely impossible—because if it was possible, someone else would already have won it.

"I may say this or that, but the truth is that I think of myself as special," said Holo, sounding faintly amused, perhaps to cover her embarrassment. "I can get through most things simply by showing my fangs. I can draw out the way of things. That's what I thought. But..."

When Lawrence held out his arm, Holo glanced at him with

a look of hollow amusement pasted onto her face and then took it, wrapping it around herself like a muffler and clinging to him.

"There were no paintings there of the land I knew. What does that mean?"

Each of the pieces had either been commissioned by a specific buyer or stored away in anticipation of someone from the region appearing and recognizing the landscape. It was not hard, therefore, to come to this conclusion: There were no paintings of Yoitsu because there was no one from Yoitsu to order them. It was easy to imagine her wolf comrades leaving on an eternal journey.

And what was the basis for this?

No doubt many of them, having confidence in their own teeth and claws, chose to fight. And even if they had likely fled from the Moon-Hunting Bear, the world was abundant with absurdities. If they had been able to find weapons, they would have risen up and fought—somewhere.

The ones who ran away from everything, who instead of taking up arms simply fled, would have been called cowards at first. But it was those cowards whose roots still clung to the earth, even now.

"Plugging one's ears and closing one's eyes for fear of the truth? 'Tis all I can do to laugh at such foolishness. But who is the master of this shop? Who is it who still knows many of his old friends? Who is it who even now still works to offer comfort to his kind? Compared with that..." The nails of Holo's small hand dug into Lawrence's arm. "... What am I doing?"

She was not crying.

Holo was not sad. She was ashamed.

The raging river of time had changed the world, and she and her kind had stood on the shore, not only powerless, but their very existence suddenly in doubt.



It was more than enough reason for Holo to gnash her teeth.

Lawrence put more strength into his embrace, drawing Holo in.

"Nobody knows what the right thing to do is." Holo's head smelled faintly of dust, perhaps because of the time she had spent in the storeroom. "You yourself have been prepared to put your life at risk for the sake of your principles. Am I wrong?"

Holo did not move for several moments.

"Just think about when you were buried in the ground. You're Holo the Wisewolf, aren't you?"

No doubt her comrades would be very pleased to know that Holo was thinking of them. But what would they think of her standing in front of their gravestone forever? Regret could mean struggling to turn back time, or it could mean swearing not to let the same thing happen again. The two meanings were very different.

Holo nodded. She was neither a child, nor a fool. And yet she still could not contain these emotions on her own.

"And I do know one thing," said Lawrence, which made Holo's ears prick up. He smiled, but not to cheer her up. "When you worry, so do I."

When he had traveled alone, there had been no one to whom he would have uttered such words, nor anyone who would say them to him. When he would get involved in a risky trade, he would make boastful jokes about dying by the side of the road.

A dead friend was dead forever. But a living one existed only in the here and now.

"Fool," she whispered, though it was by no means clear to whom. Perhaps both to herself and to Lawrence alike.

"Quite right," said Lawrence. "So, the next thing to do is...?"

Holo's voice caught in her throat.

She had not left Col alone in the storeroom simply because they had found only landscapes he recognized and none that she

knew. Given Col's disposition, if they were unable to find any paintings of Holo's homeland, he would just keep looking.

And the more he looked, the heavier the weight of not finding anything became. Holo had not exactly taken her frustration out on him, but back in the storeroom, just how bad was Col feeling?

"I'll go apologize," said Holo.

"You do that," said Lawrence paternally, and Holo broke free from his embrace and grinned a toothy grin.

Time could not be turned back and the correct choice was never obvious, so one had to try to enjoy the present, at least.

That was all Lawrence could say. The rest was up to Holo, he thought as he reopened the book.

"Miss Fran Vonely has returned."

Before standing, Lawrence lightly tapped Holo's knee. He looked back—she was wearing a bright smile, which was more than a little suspicious.

From behind Hugues, who was no doubt unused to having such a smile directed at him by a wolf so nearby, appeared a young girl.

She was not much taller than Col, which put her at about Holo's height.

It was her appearance that made Lawrence's face pale despite himself. She did not have Holo's ears, nor horns like Huskins had. She was just a normal girl—if you ignored the color of her skin and her eyes.

"Is this the merchant who called after me?" Her voice was beautiful and clear and spoke of a good upbringing.

There are many forms of beauty in the world, but Lawrence had never before seen the sort that Fran possessed. Her hair and eyes were jet-black, and she had the dark brown skin common in the desert lands of the south. Hers was a bewitching beauty; she had

a mysterious charm to her, the power of all who survived in the hellish deserts. It felt as though she would not quail, even if Holo took her wolf form then and there.

Lawrence swallowed and then finally managed to speak. "I am Kraft Lawrence."

Fran Vonely smiled and gave a slow nod. She introduced herself. "I am Fran Vonely."

"Shall we sit?" said the considerate Hugues, and Lawrence and company all took a seat.

Col clung to Holo's clothing before finally managing to sit, seemingly dazed by Fran's mysterious quality.

"So, what is it that you wished to ask me about?"

The people of the desert spoke a very different language, but Fran's words were well practiced. Her pronunciation was careful and precise, and her education must have been a costly one.

They were said to be a difficult people, but perhaps such worries were unfounded, Lawrence thought behind his merchant's smile. He told her his business. "Yes. We're journeying in search of a certain place in the northlands. All we know is the ancient name of the place. We've heard that you're very well-versed in the old tales, which is what brought us to visit this company."

Fran's face was serious as she listened to Lawrence. "And what is the name of the place?"

"Yoitsu."

Fran narrowed her eyes at Lawrence's answer. "That's the old name of a rather remote area."

"So you're familiar with it?" Lawrence asked with emotion that was half-act, half-genuine. Fran was unmoved, like some stoic seer.

"I am aware of it, but few are able to draw maps of the north, making them extremely precious."

"We would compensate you properly." The moment Lawrence said it, Holo's foot came down upon his, but it was too late.

Perhaps Holo had seen through to Fran's true nature.

"Properly?" said Fran, surprised. Standing behind the chair in which Fran sat, Hugues covered his eyes. "In that case, fifty *lumione* ought to suffice."

Hers was the attitude of an artisan inexperienced in the ways of negotiation. Lawrence asked himself if he had let his guard down so badly, but even if he had, there was no going back now. There was no way he was going to pay fifty *lumione* for a single map.

It was such a basic technique that it bordered on child's play. Lawrence found himself at a loss for words, both because of his own foolishness and because of Fran's unexpected boldness. But Holo was standing right there, so he had to say something. He was just about to when Fran's clear voice rang out again.

"However, given the circumstances, I suppose I wouldn't mind doing it for free."

"Huh?" Lawrence could not help but let his mask slip completely, and he could feel Holo slump in annoyance.

It was hard to fix a cog once it had gone askew.

But it was not the foolish Lawrence to whom Fran directed her words. It was Holo. "I notice you're dressed as a nun."

"...My name is Holo." Even Holo seemed surprised to be addressed, and she replied only after a short pause.

"Miss Holo, is it? Pleased to meet you. I am Fran Vonely."

Holo, who called herself the wisewolf, was a calm huntress and never let excitement get the better of her during a hunt. "Have you something for me?"

"Yes. If you're a nun, then I would ask a favor of you."

It was Hugues who seemed flustered at these words, probably because he had realized Fran's aim. He took a breath and seemed about to protest, but Fran raised her hand and silenced him. She was a prickly artist, indeed. The very image of one.

"So long as it's in my power."

Fran cocked her head rather than smiling. "It's not so very difficult a thing. Miss Holo, Mr. Lawrence, and..."

"Ah, er—Col! My name's Col."

She nodded at Col. "Mr. Col, then." Just what would she have them do? "With the three of you, it should be fine."

Hugues looked at Lawrence with a desperate look that said, "Stop!"

Fran spoke. "I'd like your help in Taussig."

"...Is that...?"

"Yes. I suppose you've heard from Mr. Hugues? It's the reason I'm in this town. I would ask your assistance in learning more about the village's legend."

Lawrence was underwhelmed. It seemed so simple a thing. But from Hugues's nervousness, it was not as simple as it sounded.

Despite his failure moments earlier, Lawrence prepared himself for the irritation he would earn from Fran when he begged more time to consider. But it was Holo who skipped past that entirely.

"And you'll draw us a map if we assist you?" she asked.

"Yes. So long as you'll gather information and verify its truth."

Lawrence was not unaware of the reason for Holo's smile. Fran was a clever girl—more than clever enough to inflame Holo's love of competition.

Normally she would have laughed off such a vague request as "gather information and verify its truth," demanding a clearer request. Depending on the circumstances, she was not above arm-twisting.

And yet without asking even one more question, Holo simply nodded. "It's a promise, then."

"My thanks." Fran bowed her head, standing after she looked back up. She faced Hugues, who had tried so hard to get a word in and hold her up. "And the preparations for departure?"

"Ah, th-they're all finished."

"Very well. We'll leave tomorrow. Mr. Lawrence, you can handle a wagon?"

Lawrence nodded, and though Fran seemed ready to continue speaking, he headed her off in a final effort to save some small amount of face. "Tomorrow should be fine."

At this, Fran smiled faintly. Perhaps she found Lawrence's attempt to puff himself up amusing. Her smile was that of an innocent maiden. Lawrence again regretted his misstep. It was surprisingly easy to manipulate an innocently and honestly stubborn person. What was truly difficult was someone who knew how to use her smile, which was why Lawrence was constantly burning his hands when dealing with Holo.

Had he known he would be facing someone who could deploy a smile like that at will, Lawrence would have prepared better. He had been too hasty in embracing the impression of her that Kieman and Hugues had given him.

"Mr. Hugues," said Fran, causing Hugues's round body to stiffen straight. "I'll take my dinner in my room. I have preparations to attend to."

"V-very well. Ah, er, but..."

"But?" She used the same smile Holo so often favored.

Hugues fell silent and swallowed. He nodded obediently.

"Please explain the details to Miss Holo and her company, if you will," said Fran, and then she took her leave.

The tail next to Lawrence was puffed up, but the smile was a pleasant one, which was all the more alarming.

Lawrence attempted to at least avoid the mistake of trying to make an excuse. "I'm sorry."

"Fool," said Holo, not so much as looking at him.

Col cringed away as though trying to let sleeping gods lie, and Holo, still smiling, made no move to speak further.

Perhaps feeling the awkwardness, it was Hugues who finally raised his voice. "I've suffered my share at her boldness and unyielding smile, too. She is a stubborn, obstinate silversmith. I chased her in town, across fields, and into the mountains, finally saving her from an accident before she would finally speak to me. So... you are fortunate she was even willing to deal with you, even on the vaguest of terms."

These last words were directed at Holo.

Holo nodded decisively, finally wiping the eerie smile from her face.

"Er, so... Is there something important in Taussig?" Lawrence asked after recovering his composure.

Hugues merely shook his head. "It's just a village like any other."

"So why, then?"

Hugues looked down briefly, then back up, as though peering over spectacles. "Their legend of the forest and lake isn't so special a thing. It's said that once an angel walked alongside the river that flows from the lake, then leapt up a waterfall to a golden door that opened along with the sound of a heavenly beast's cry."

It did indeed sound like the sort of legend one could hear anywhere. But Hugues continued.

"In addition to that, there's another story like that."

"Another one?" Lawrence asked, at which Hugues nodded and began to explain, a certain tone of exhaustion in his voice.

"I suppose you could call it a witch legend. I don't know the details myself, but I hear it's rather famous upriver around Lenos. Evidently there's a legend that a nun also said to be a witch came to Taussig and settled there, or perhaps it's closer to a rumor. The lord of Taussig is loyal to the Church, so of course they all strongly deny that there's a witch there, but..."

"Ah, I see. And because of that, the villagers there are extremely suspicious of outsiders, right?"

Hugues nodded. "The reason Fran asked you along, Mr. Lawrence, is because she knows full well that no one there will so much as speak to her if she goes alone. If nothing else, her ethnicity is very uncommon in this area."

Hugues had lived longer than any human, so Lawrence certainly understood why he would say so. Lawrence, too, had only rarely seen people with brown skin like Fran's.

"Is she from the desert?"

"That is the story. But she's had no parents as long as she can remember and claims to have been raised by a wealthy money changer in the duchy of Laondirre. I have little sense of how she then came to be a silversmith. She's joked about being a slave, but given her attitudes, I wonder how much of that is a joke..."

Lawrence understood Hugues's uneasy smile. Given Fran's diction, anyone would come to a certain conclusion about her background. Of course, slaves could be treated very differently depending on their master, and she might have been bought into a kind and wealthy household—or just as easily adopted into the family but treated cruelly.

There were places where this matched what he had been told by Kieman, and even if not everything lined up, there was at least a certain amount of truth to it.

"She's certainly got pluck."

"Yes. Sometimes I think she must be from a line of warriors somewhere, but...in any case, she has many secrets. Oh, and please keep this—"

"—A secret, of course."

Hugues nodded, and Lawrence returned to the topic at hand.

"Mr. Hugues, you seemed a bit apprehensive—do you think the village will be dangerous?"

Villages were often less welcoming than one might think for a variety of reasons. If they were situated in a place where few

traveled, that alone was enough to make outsiders seem suspicious. If it was the sort of place where rumors of a witch would circulate, they might well start to wonder if every visitor had some secret agenda.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't know. They're not a place of business. The villagers rarely visit the town, and townspeople go there even less often than that. Frankly, they're like a jar of food where you've forgotten what you put in it and when."

It was an apt metaphor. One would hesitate to open such a jar for fear of what might come out.

"Oh, do you suppose there's anything there that would be dangerous even with me along?" It was Holo whose quip cut through the atmosphere of heavy tension between Lawrence and Hugues.

Lawrence met Hugues's eyes. The two were surely thinking the same thing.

"If you say so, it matters little what we might say, but...," said Lawrence.

"Then I care not. In exchange for fifty gold pieces, she gets to use us as she pleases. Such nerve!" It would have been better if Holo were angry, but she spoke with a smile, so Lawrence's hands were tied. "And that fool's even knowledgeable about the northlands that have you all so intimidated. Is it not just as old man Huskins said?"

It was indeed.

"'Tis true that he who chases two hares catches neither, but no matter how many interesting things are stored in that head of hers, it's still just one head. So if we do not bite it here, when will we?"

It was a lively speech. And yet Holo was not one to say such things lightly. She only did so because she had faith in her comrades to be trustworthy enough to correct her, to challenge her. That was the feeling Lawrence got, looking at Holo's invincible smile.

Which meant he had no reason to disagree.

"So, that's the way of it. Ah, and Hugues, was it?"

"Y-yes?" He straightened at Holo's address.

Holo grinned at the stiff Hugues. "If we should end up angering that fool such that she never trades here again..." It was unlikely, but not impossible, and would be a crushing blow to Hugues's business.

What was Holo going to say? All eyes were on her as she continued in a casual tone, "...Aye, should that happen...I'll apologize."

Hugues was a well-traveled art seller. His forced smile shifted to a genuine one, and he slapped his large belly. "Ah, just like a wolf!"

"Mm." Holo's deliberate little performance.

And yet something about the unlikely friendship between sheep and wolf struck Lawrence as miraculous.

The next day, Lawrence and company found themselves swaying in the Hugues Company's wagon, heading north along the road to the village of Taussig. In the wagon bed was a mountain of provisions: bread and meat, garlic and onions, wine, salt, firewood, and blankets.

Lawrence sat in the driver's seat of the wagon, holding the reins, with Holo and Col snuggled in what space remained in the bed. Fran, who knew the way to the village, rode on a horse of her own.

It had not been particularly long since the last time he had driven a wagon, but somehow driving someone else's wagon made Lawrence uneasy.

"Just who...does that little fool...think she is?" Holo finally said, only getting the words out with some difficulty since her mouth was otherwise occupied.

"That delicious, is it?" asked Lawrence with a resigned sigh as he looked over his shoulder, which made Col flinch in alarm as he sat

next to Holo. Normally he only ate what he was given, but he had finally been bold enough to reach into the sack for a second piece.

"Not you, Col. That's only your second piece, right? The one next to you is on her sixth." Lawrence pointed deliberately at Holo, and Col looked dubiously back and forth between Lawrence and the sack, finally nodding.

They were delicious enough to make a captive even of Col, who was the very image of honorable poverty. The leavened rolls had been made with plenty of rich butter.

Holo noisily tore a chunk off a roll, wolfing it down before popping the remainder in her mouth. As her mouth opened and closed in the process, her breath escaped into the cold air in white puffs.

Not even Col could resist the temptation of fresh-baked bread in a chilly wagon bed.

Lawrence got a piece himself but had eaten no more for fear that he might get used to such food and never return to the traveler's life.

"If it gets us so much of this sort of bread, you ought to become an artist yourself!" declared Holo.

"I can sketch simple pictures of goods... and drawings of my future shop, I suppose. I showed you, didn't I?" He was referring to the days when he'd driven his wagon alone, passing his days by scavenging every copper coin that had been dropped in the darkness. Every time he earned a healthy profit, he would spread out some paper and draw the facade of the shop he hoped to one day own.

"Mm... I suppose."

Lawrence's dream had been postponed while he journeyed with Holo.

Holo drew her chin in and moved closer to the driver's seat. She shoved a roll in Lawrence's mouth. She seemed neither apologetic nor pained.

Lawrence bit into the bread with a smile. The conversation was only possible because they understood each other so well.

"Can you draw, Col?" Lawrence asked over his shoulder.

It looked as though Col was seriously considering shoving the unfinished roll into his own bag for later eating. He flinched as though having been caught doing something embarrassing. He hastily tried to manage some sort of answer, at which Lawrence could not help but laugh.

But before either of them could say anything, Holo popped another roll she had grabbed into Col's bag.

"Ah, er... well, I suppose I can draw angels or spirits..."

"From copying manuscript illustrations?"

Col smiled ticklishly at Holo and then turned back to Lawrence and nodded. "Yes. When I had no money and was rolling out sheepskin parchments on nails, sometimes the scribes would teach me a little."

Col was the sort of boy who would journey south alone just to get closer to the center of Church power in order to protect his own pagan village, but he seemed much more suited to poring over books all day than he did to the adventurous pursuits in which he found himself engaged. Had he been born into different circumstances, he surely would have been a famous scholar.

Lawrence turned his attention to Holo. "And what about you...? I suppose there's no point in asking."

If Holo was to pick up a brush, no doubt she could draw a highly recognizable picture.

"Hmph. I do not draw. You can't eat a picture of an apple," said Holo, as she helped herself to another roll.

"Well, Fran's skills must be impressive for her to command such tribute. And she's followed after legends from many lands," said Lawrence quietly as he looked across the plain before them. The mountains did not seem to be getting any closer. "She's seen

a lot of trouble, I'll bet. The northlands are still disputed territory. With belief turning to superstition, and superstition to belief with such dizzying speed, tracking down legends is a dangerous business. Given that, her price might be a fair one."

And the farther north one went, the more difficult it became to find good building stone, which meant even larger buildings were made of wood. Without stained-glass depictions of saints or figures carved in stone columns, which meant their proselytizing would rely on paintings.

With demand up, it stood to reason that the suppliers must profit.

"She's to be admired," murmured Lawrence, stroking his beard.

"Hmph. I've admired quite enough," said Holo, patting her belly and then setting about curling up in a blanket.

They spent the night in the dry, brown grasses of the plains.

There was not much difference between a horse's walking speed and a human's, so travelers on that road all naturally tended to arrive at that spot come nightfall.

It was there that Lawrence halted the horse and built a fire where the grass had been cut low and the remains of older campfires were scattered about. Happily, there was a large round log perfect for leaning against.

Former visitors had been similarly grateful. One place on the log had been stripped of bark, and there the former visitors had carved words of thanks.

The small party warmed the bread—which had turned hard from the chill—by the fire, roasting jerky and cheese to eat along with it. There was no wind, but it was cold enough for a small amount of snow to have piled up here and there, so they naturally wound up huddled together atop the log like little birds. It was warmer for three people to huddle together under three layers of

blankets than it was for three people to each have one blanket to themselves.

And it was just three, not four.

Fran lay down in the wagon bed alone.

"The stone's warm." Lawrence had warmed a stone atop the fire and brought it to Fran wrapped in a blanket. She was gazing vaguely up at the sky, using the cargo for a pillow. Next to her was some half-eaten bread and cheese, but she was so absorbed in the night sky that she seemed to have forgotten all about her dinner.

When Lawrence brought the wrapped stone to her, she shifted beneath her blanket and a hand slid out from under it, accepting the warm rock.

As he gave her this, Lawrence thought he saw her holding a thick book under her blanket.

When he had traveled alone, Lawrence, too, had sometimes resorted to stuffing paper under his shirt for warmth when he was unable to light a fire. It could be even warmer than a blanket.

Fran, too, seemed quite accustomed to hard travel.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit by the fire?" Lawrence asked.

Fran arranged the stone beneath the blanket and looked back up at the sky before answering, "It would ruin my view."

Lawrence understood and nodded.

Fire kept animals away, but it invited humans, whether they were friend or foe. Eyes accustomed to watching the fire would be useless for looking out into the night.

Not only was Fran used to travel, she had accrued a very respectable amount of experience.

"About tomorrow..." Fran directed her gaze to Lawrence after he spoke. She did not seem inclined to sit up, so Lawrence decided to simply continue speaking. "Once we arrive in the village, what sort of arrangements shall we make?"

Lawrence had found himself roundly beaten in their first negotiation at the Hugues Company the previous day. Thinking back on it now, he realized it had surely colored Fran's impression of his capacity as a merchant. Though she had brought Lawrence along to help her gather information, she probably detested the notion of leaving everything to him and his companions, so he posed this question in a humble, servile tone.

But after looking at him steadily for a moment, Fran suddenly smiled and closed her eyes, as though having seen right through the whole of his thinking. "I shall leave it in your capable hands."

Lawrence was surprised at this response, but if she was truly going to rely on him, he would do his best to meet her expectations. "In that case, I'll introduce you as a Church-affiliated silversmith and Holo as a nun. Will that do?"

"...I shouldn't think there will be any problem with that." She'd taken a moment to consider the notion. She could probably see through to roughly how such a story would be received.

"Holo will be an apprentice nun and maidservant. Col will be our guide. I'll be a traveling merchant hired to be the group's eyes and ears."

"Very well," said Fran, but her smile was a thin one.

Lawrence took notice of this. "Is there a problem?"

"...No, nothing. I was just amused at how if we assemble the necessary actors, it's true that even I might look like a nun."

The ability to see one's own self so objectively could indeed be counted as a special skill. Lawrence found himself briefly at a loss for words at how naturally Fran was able to speak as though she were looking at herself from the outside.

"What church?" inquired Fran.

Once he had finished frantically filling in the blanks in Fran's brusque question, Lawrence answered, "Let's say we're from the Church city of Ruvinheigen. There's certainly more than one

church there and many factions besides. Even if our answer's a vague one, we won't be easily found out."

"..." Fran opened her eyes and looked at Lawrence.

Lawrence was wondering if he had made some mistake. Fran then looked back up at the sky and spoke. "You're familiar with some rather faraway towns."

Lawrence was relieved that it was only this. "A lie that can't be disproven is no different from the truth. A place as far away as Ruvinheigen is a safer story, I thought."

Fran nodded, her gaze still skyward cast. "Was that your base?"

Base was a curious choice of words. It made Lawrence sound like a bandit or mercenary.

"I'm a traveling merchant originally from that area. Holo simply jumped into my wagon bed when I passed through a nearby town. Then..." Lawrence paused and looked behind him at Holo, who sat atop the log sipping wine. Only Col seemed to be looking at he and Fran, so Lawrence turned back to Fran and continued, "...And told me that she wanted to go north and that I should take her. As far as Col goes, we ran into him as we were heading down the Roam River, and he joined our travels."

Fran's face was still upturned, her eyes closed, but Lawrence nonetheless got the feeling that she was listening to him. For her to be interested in this story at all made Lawrence wonder if she had some sort of attachment to the region.

At length, Fran spoke as though giving voice to words she heard from the sky. "So this map of the north you want is for..." She opened her eyes, and when she looked at Lawrence, it seemed as though the night sky had melted into them. It was common for stubborn, eccentric people to feel things more deeply than most.

Lawrence was not going to use that to his advantage, but he spoke such that his words would have their greatest effect. "Yes...

the only thing my companion remembers about her homeland is that it was called Yoitsu."

Fran's eyes did not waver. "I see," she said, closing them, this time not looking up again, but leaning her head over. She shifted lightly under the blanket, and given that a gentle sigh followed, Lawrence realized she was trying to go to sleep.

Her way of unilaterally ending the conversation made Lawrence understand why she had a reputation for being difficult; it was almost too archetypal.

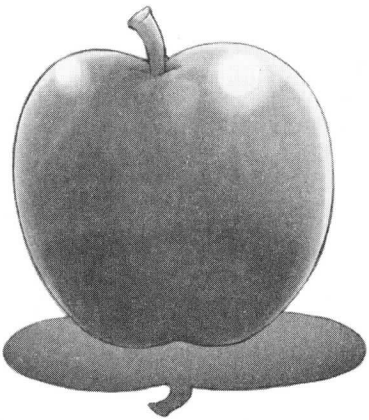
Perhaps Fran was neither so stubborn nor as eccentric as her reputation suggested, Lawrence mused, but there was no telling what would happen if he was to point that out.

Lawrence quietly made ready to leave her be, but before he did, Fran spoke one last time.

"I shall be counting on you tomorrow."

Lawrence nodded, whereupon Fran did just as she seemed to be doing and fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE



The wagon swerved violently to one side. The motion seemed to have awakened Holo.

"...Have we arrived?" She yawned a great yawn, shaking her head lazily from side to side.

The now-close mountains were dotted with trees even in this cold season, and here and there white stuff could be seen. The grassy field looked like a flat plane but was actually a gentle slope, and if one looked upslope, it was clear it descended from an impressive height. It was not Lawrence's imagination that the air was cooler here than in Kerube, and a thin layer of snow stuck to the road.

"If we turn down this road, then go straight, we'll soon be at the village, apparently."

The field of golden, knee-high grass stretched far to the east. If they did not turn and instead proceeded straight, they would evidently run straight into the foot of the mountains.

Lawrence and company had stopped their horses here to practice their various roles and stories before entering the village. Holo had grumbled the previous night but generally enjoyed such theatrical dissembling.

Once they had run through their stories, Fran took the lead and they set off again. Holo's tail swished happily beneath her robe.

"Speaking of which, I neglected to ask you, but that wasn't you in that tale, was it?" asked Lawrence suddenly, as Fran seemed in a hurry and had opened up a bit of distance between her and the wagon.

Holo replied without much interest as she ate a small piece of jerky. "Alas, I've no bird friends aside from that one lass from some time ago, and I've no feathers myself."

"And no ideas, either?"

Holo shook her head wordlessly and sighed. "Had the legendary figure in question been me, they would've forced that fool to draw them a map..." She turned away as though apologizing for trouble she had caused.

If Lawrence suspected this as being an act, he would surely make her angry, and yet it had to be an act. Col seemed to be frantically trying to think of the words with which to console her, but meeting his eyes, Lawrence only smiled.

"If all goes well when we begin to ask around, how shall we fill our remaining time?" he asked.

Holo looked up suddenly and smiled. Partially because she was holding Col's hand in a very sibling-like fashion, she suddenly seemed much like the young maiden she appeared to be.

No doubt she was not entirely in earnest, but at least some part of her was.

Soon a single, far-off thread of smoke appeared, probably from a distant hearth or stove, and soon after that they arrived at the town. Holo took one look at it. "Perhaps I ate a bit too much wheat bread," she said sardonically.

It seemed unlikely that much wheat bread was baked in Taussig, nestled as it was at the foot of the mountains. Half

buried in the foothills, it had an apologetic little excuse of a fence to keep out wild animals, hung with wards for driving off evil spirits—evidence of the Church.

Had they not already heard the rumors of a witch, the placement of those wards would have been strange, because indifferent to the darkness and danger that lurked in the mountains, they instead faced out toward the plains. It made Lawrence imagine inexperienced travelers who feared only the wolves before them, heedless of the bandits behind them.

He imagined Taussig to be a gloomy, sparsely peopled village, but it was not so. The sound of happy children's voices could be heard from the houses, and sheep and goats grazed lazily in the village's wide lanes. It seemed a perfectly normal village.

It was said that the source of most quarrels was mutual ignorance, and perhaps that was not so untrue.

Lawrence climbed off the wagon, looking to the still-mounted Fran. "If you would, please," she said quietly.

With his left hand he took the reins of Fran's horse, and with his right the reins of the wagon horse, and proceeded slowly into the village. Eventually an old man sitting on a roughly hewn wooden bench at one corner of the village's entrance took notice of them.

"Now, then," said Lawrence softly, putting on his best merchant's smile.

"My, my... have we travelers here?" It looked as though the old man was out watching the livestock as they grazed. His hand gripped a shepherd's staff.

"Greetings to you. I am a traveling merchant. My name is Kraft Lawrence."

"Oh, a merchant, are you?" Wrinkles appeared around the old man's eyes, as though he was wondering what business a merchant could possibly have in this town.

In the village, first the children and then the rest of the villagers began to take notice of their unusual visitors. Some watched from their eaves, others from cracks in their wooden windows.

"We've come from Ruvinheigen, a place far to the south."

"Ruvin..."

"Ruvinheigen."

The old man nodded and fixed his gaze on Lawrence and his party for a time. When the old man was not moving, he looked like a doll made from tree bark.

"It's known as the city of the Church."

Suddenly the man's gaze moved from Lawrence to Fran, up on her horse—and then, moments later, to Holo and Col, who had climbed down from the wagon bed.

Then with a sudden sigh he looked back at Lawrence with a troubled gaze. "What business would people of the Church have with this village?"

Lawrence answered, with a huge smile that would have made a child burst into tears, "Actually, we've heard tell of a legend regarding a holy angel that came to earth here. As faithful servants of God, we were hoping we could hear more of the tale..." The old man did not immediately react, so Lawrence jokingly continued, "Is the angel here in the village now?"

"No! Don't be absurd!"

The old man's voice was so suddenly strident that Lawrence was momentarily taken aback. The loud voice startled the livestock as well; the hogs squealed and the goats stamped their hooves. The chickens, though flightless, flapped their wings to escape, and the old man looked Lawrence in the eye.

"It had nothing to do with this village. It's true that it came through here but merely asked directions. It truly, truly had no business here!"

The man was desperately insistent. Lawrence hastily tried to

clear his head and think things over. It came through here? And had nothing to do with the village?

"I understand. I understand!" It was all Lawrence could do to raise his hands in mollification. He certainly was not going to pose another question.

The old man's shoulders moved with his heavy breathing, and he leaned forward, eyes wide, as though he had yet more to say. His lips trembled, either from overexcitement or simple anger.

But what had put him in such a state?

As Lawrence mulled it over, several men came out of the village.

Lawrence heard the rustle of clothing behind him; Col was making himself ready. Holo did likewise—because the men were all carrying large hatchets or knives.

Fran, meanwhile, did not so much as move, instead remaining hooded atop her horse.

Lawrence indicated with his hand that they should keep calm, but not because he was trying to preserve his pride in front of Fran, nor out of empty reassurance. If all the men had been carrying were weapons, he would have done an about-face on the spot, and the reason he had not was probably the same reason Fran had not.

The three men that approached were bloodstained up to their elbows, and their faces showed irritation at having been interrupted. The hatchets and knives had surely been used for butchering, and after all, when someone has proposed to kill another, their expression is not one of annoyance.

"Travelers, are you?" asked the most sturdily built of the three middle-aged men. The old man looked over his shoulder and tried to speak.

"It's all right, elder. Calm yourself."

The elder's mouth opened and closed wordlessly. It seemed the

men's expressions of irritation were directed not at the outsiders, but instead at the village elder, the old man.

"Circa!"

The man turned around and shouted, and a woman emerged from one of the homes.

He indicated the elder with his posture, and the woman seemed to immediately understand and approached.

The man directed the woman he had called Circa over to the old man and patted his back reassuringly. He then looked over at Lawrence.

"Apologies, kind travelers. He didn't say anything too terrible to you, did he?" he asked, dropping his hatchet on the ground. As he casually rubbed his gore-stained hands off on his trousers, he seemed to immediately know who among the band of travelers would speak for them. This was something townspeople always know, but those raised in small villages frequently struggled with the issue.

Lawrence found himself surprised by those who lived like this—people for whom status or wealth was a mere fantasy.

"No, not at all. However, I appear to have asked him something terrible, as he seemed deeply frightened...," Lawrence said, trying to elicit useful information.

The bearded man smiled ruefully. "Misfortune always comes from the outside, after all."

He seemed to know the way of the world. Perhaps he handled the village's dealings with the outside world. So if Lawrence showed his thanks, perhaps it would be returned in kind.

"My name is Kraft Lawrence. I'm a traveling merchant," he said, extending his right hand.

The man looked Lawrence straight in the face, then down to his own hand, then to the hand Lawrence offered. After a time, he finally took the hand. "Heureux Mueller," he said. "So, there

aren't many possibilities for why the elder would be so afraid. One, his time has come. Two, a tax collector has come. Three, someone asking after bad rumors has come."

Mountain villages relied on hunting in between stints of farming work. Mueller's folded arms were twice as thick as Lawrence's and splattered with blood up to their elbows, which made them seem even more intimidating. Though Lawrence felt no malice from him or the men on either side of him, these were men who radiated heat from head to toe, blades in hand, as though to offer proof they had just been doing hard labor.

But if he backed down here, it would be implying a debt on their part to him. "Actually, we've come to hear the legend of the angel."

"The angel?" The man knit his brow and glanced at Lawrence's traveling companions behind him. Then he continued, as though suddenly remembering something, "Oh! So that's it, eh?"

"Might we be able to hear more?" Lawrence asked, his eyes upturned with a trace of humility.

Mueller laughed the hearty laugh of the hunter, though it had a trace of the farmer's gentle smile in it. "Ha-ha-ha! You needn't bow and scrape so. I'll bet you've heard all sorts of bad things about this village in town. They all think anyone who doesn't live in a town are ignorant and superstitious. And I suppose there are some ignorant villages around, but not us. I'll tell you as much as you want to hear of the angel legend."

If people could believe each other's words, then there would be no liars or thieves anywhere in the world and no reason for doubt.

Even supposing the man was such a good liar that Lawrence could not see through him, Holo would not be deceived.

"Now then, kind traveler... Mr. Lawrence, was it? Have you and your companions eaten?"

Had he been traveling by himself, he would not have refused a meal even if he had already been full. But Lawrence gave Fran a questioning look, and the well-traveled Fran seemed to agree.

"No, we haven't," said Lawrence.

"Then we'll treat you to some of the deer we've just slaughtered," said Mueller. He looked around, perhaps searching for the person who would take on that duty.

"Vino, we'll handle the tanning. Let us borrow your hearth, will you?"

"Ah, God's will be done," said the man called Vino jokingly. Tanning was hard work, so to instead lend one's hearth out and entertain guests, knowing he would have his own share of meat and wine, was cause for a pleased word or two.

But Mueller's face turned stern. "This isn't leisure time, understand?" He was of goodly years in addition to his size, so when he turned intimidating, it was rather impressive.

Vino's affability led him to duck his head. "I know, I know. 'No wine,' right?"

Lawrence chuckled a sincere laugh at the friendly antics of the villagers. But then he noticed Fran watching the proceedings with a look that could only be described as nostalgic. She had apparently grown up in the home of a wealthy money changer in the south, so it was a bit strange for her to be nostalgic for this kind of conversation.

Lawrence wondered if she was thinking about the things that had happened on her travels thus far, when Vino turned to him and spoke. "Now then, this way. Follow me!"

Vino led Lawrence and company into a typical village cottage. Beside the cottage was a little field without so much as a fence, and beside that were stakes to which goats and chickens were tied. A large awning hung out over the garden, under which a woman with a baby tied to her back sat on the ground, kerchief

around her head as she worked grain on a grindstone in front of her.

Vino called out lightly to her, and as he approached, he gave the baby a kiss, leading Lawrence to wonder if he and the woman were husband and wife. The woman wiped the sweat from her brow and stood, clapping her hands free from dust as she approached Lawrence and looked the little group over in mild surprise. She then nodded as though she had accepted a great responsibility.

"I'll go fetch some firewood, so please go and wait inside."

Vino nodded, and Lawrence and his companions entered their home.

The floor was packed earth, and over the hearth hung a hook from the ceiling. There was a small, snug opening in the ceiling to let smoke escape, and Lawrence thought he could see traces of birds' nests built boldly into the roof. In one corner of the room, straw raincoats and cages hung. It was every inch the winter cottage. There was a tenuous little fire smoldering in the hearth, which somehow made it look even colder.

Fran was content to play the guest and sat unhesitatingly down by the hearth. When Holo and Col started poking at the strings of onions hanging from the beams, Vino returned from the field behind the cottage with an armful of firewood.

"So you grind flour by hand in this village?"

"Hmm? Ah, oh yes. You can just leave your things there. We'll just add these to the fire... there. I'll go get some meat," said Vino as he skillfully lay the firewood in the hearth. He gave it a couple of strong blows and then nodded in satisfaction before hurrying back out of the cottage.

"Why do you ask?" Holo asked.

"Hmm?"

Holo was gazing out through a crack in a wooden window set

in one corner of the earth wall and had not even looked back when she had asked her question. Perhaps she meant the flour grinding.

"Oh, I was just thinking that it's rare to see people grinding flour by hand when there's a river nearby," said Lawrence.

The millstone Vino's wife had been using was essentially two flat stones placed one atop the other, and between them enough flour could be ground to suffice for a single family's daily needs. But of course the bigger the stone, the greater the amount of flour that could be ground at once.

Since grinding enough to bake bread every day was crucial, most villages would build a water mill, if there was a river nearby, that all the villagers could use. But not for free—in most places, the local landowner would construct the mill and tax villagers or merchants for its use. The landlord could not collect taxes from villagers who ground their grain by hand, and it struck Lawrence as odd.

Holo nodded, though it was unclear whether she accepted Lawrence's explanation or not—probably because she simply lacked interest.

Lawrence sat across the hearth from Fran, and Holo and Col followed him. He indicated that Holo should sit next to Fran. She was Fran's chaperone, after all, so she could not very well do otherwise. Holo looked irritated but complied.

Fran, meanwhile, had been quiet the entire time, but Lawrence got the feeling she had paid attention during his explanation of the millstones. He would have to ask Holo about that later.

As the thought occurred to Lawrence, Vino returned, carrying a basket filled with venison.

Into a burbling, boiling pot hanging from the hook, which in turn hung from the ceiling, were tossed thin, meager carrots,

burdock, and other vegetables. Beside the pot the pile of venison was made ready, and despite having eaten so much bread, Holo fidgeted beneath her robe at the sight of it.

Lawrence felt bad for being treated so and had offered something of theirs—not bread or jerky from their large stores, but rather a modest amount of salt. At this, Vino and his wife's eyes had gone round, and Lawrence was reminded of how drastically conditions could change from one place to another. Here there was plenty of venison but obtaining salt was difficult.

If he was to tell Holo that this principle was the key to business, he would get nothing more than a disdainful sniff for his trouble, no doubt.

"Should be ready soon," declared Vino as his wife stirred the pot of vegetables and added the meat.

Without the meat, it probably would not have been to Holo's liking, but the stew had a familiar earthy smell. The meat was soon boiled and portioned out to Col, Lawrence, and Holo in order of proximity.

When it came time to serve the still-silent Fran, she spoke up slowly. "I-I cannot eat meat—"

"Oh!" said Vino's wife, who was doing the ladling.

In a village like this one, with no church, it was possible that the knowledge that clergy members abstained from meat was rather sparse.

Vino's wife looked hastily at Holo, who was nearly on the verge of tears at the prospect of not being able to eat meat.

Surprisingly it was Vino who spoke up next. "Ah, yes, I've heard that moderation pleases God, but... I believe you may at least eat some vegetables."

Holo nodded, and Vino continued speaking.

"This deer ate nothing but leaves from the day it was born, so it's no different than those plants it ate." Vino took the ladle

from his wife and served Holo five generous slices of venison. He offered to do the same for Fran, but beneath her hood she smiled and refused. Lawrence wondered if Vino would insist, but in the end, Fran's bowl was filled with only broth and vegetables.

This was not because he was surprised by the depth of her piety, but rather because he had noticed the color of her skin. Vino's shock was obvious. Given that even people in a busy town would have the same reaction, it was hardly strange that these villagers were surprised.

And being responsible for welcoming these guests, it would bring him shame if he treated them impolitely. "Now, then, please eat," Vino said, recovering his composure.

Col ate the contents of the bowl he was given without his usual haste, instead seeming to savor each bite. Perhaps it reminded him of the food in his own village. That was the sort of stew they were given, after all.

"It's delicious."

It was such a standard phrase, but Vino and his wife smiled, pleased.

"The deer was butchered just this morning. You're quite lucky."

"It's true, meat this good is hard to come by in towns."

The key to being liked by villagers was to eat and drink well. Holo immediately asked for seconds, and Vino's eyes went round as he laughed heartily.

"So, you're here for the legend of the angel? You'd come all the way out here just for that?" Vino adjusted the logs in the hearth, causing sparks to go flying up toward the roof. The risk of fire made such actions unthinkable in a town, but here if the house burned, they could simply build another one, and there was little danger that the fire would spread to nearby buildings.

"Yes. Though we heard the broad strokes of it back in town." Lawrence set his bowl down before wiping his mouth and

gesturing to Fran. "Circumstances led to my becoming a guide for Miss Fran here, and she simply must learn more about the legend."

"I see... But why would a nun wish to know such a thing?"

"While Miss Fran is a nun who's pledged service to her holy order, she's also an exceptional silversmith. The bishop has charged her to make a silver statue in the image of the angel."

"I see..." Vino gave a hesitant smile as he regarded Fran. Fran averted her eyes as though used to this sort of treatment. In doing so, she did seem quite the godly nun.

By contrast, Holo opened her mouth wide, the better to accommodate a large piece of meat. Though she froze at a look from Lawrence, her devout smile was displayed only after she had filled her mouth with venison.

"Holo here is serving Miss Fran by the order of the bishop, and as the boy Col was born in the north, he's acting as our guide. And my unworthy self is acting as our little group's eyes and ears." Lawrence cleared his throat and continued. "So, we're hoping to hear more. And..." He leaned forward as though about to ask a favor. "If possible, we'd like to be taken to the place where the legend is said to have transpired."

Vino stuck his knife into a slice of meat and ate it raw. Perhaps such eating habits were not rare in cold climes, for Col was unsurprised. Strangely it was Holo who seemed the most taken aback.

"Aye, I don't mind doing that, but..."

Places of story and legend were often important to villagers. Lawrence had anticipated it being a point of contention even if he convinced them, but things were proceeding surprisingly smooth.

As he agreed, Vino's face was, if anything, worried rather than unwilling. He continued, "I wonder if it will be all right, though.

I saw your provisions when you arrived—do you plan on staying the night in the witch's forest?"

"The witch's... forest?"

"That's the source of all the strange rumors about our village here. You've heard about the witch, haven't you?"

Perhaps remembering Mueller's warnings, Vino was only drinking small sips of the tart wine he had poured his guests, and he filled the cup in his hand with an irritated expression.

If there was a time to feign ignorance, this was it. "As far as that goes, we'd only heard that there were rumors..."

"Mm, is that so? Maybe the stories they tell in town are finally calming down. Anyway, it's not a complicated tale. If you want to go to the witch's forest, I can lead you right there. It's not far."

Lawrence met Fran's eyes and saw her slight nod. "If it's no trouble, then the sooner the better."

"Ha-ha-ha, trouble? Thanks to you lot coming, I've gotten to eat venison and drink wine and call it work! I suppose merchants and nuns don't do it often, but butchering a deer is hard work!"

The meat, skin, bones, and organs had to be separated and dealt with, each in their own way. Meat was preserved, skin was tanned before it rotted, and organs were boiled or made into sausage. Bones could become cooking implements, arrowheads, or trinkets while tendons could be made into tough, sturdy strings and ties.

But all of these parts would go bad if not tended to immediately, so it was difficult, hurried work.

Vino took a drink of wine. "Now, then. I suppose I'll need to tell you the legend of the angel before we go. It'll be no good if I wind up telling you the tale in the middle of the witch's forest," he said with a grin.

For all that the villagers avoided the witch's forest, they did not

seem to do so in a particularly exaggerated fashion. They seemed to simply acknowledge it as an unlucky place.

"So how much do you all know?"

"That by a forest lake near this village, a beast howled as a door to heaven opened; then an angel flew up into it... roughly."

Vino was ladling more stew into his bowl as Lawrence spoke and wordlessly asked Holo and Col if they wanted another serving. Fran had quietly sipped the broth, leaving even the vegetables in her bowl untouched.

"That's about the size of it. The 'forest' in this case runs along a river that flows from the lake. This happened back when the village elder was a boy, during a cold, cold winter."

Vino filled Holo's and Col's bowls back up and gave a sort of downcast smile, as though embarrassed to be relating a story like this.

"On one windy day, it was so cold that people's ears seemed about to freeze solid and be blown away. The village hunters had been trapped in the forest for three or four days, thanks to a sudden blizzard. Fortunately there was a small charcoal-making cottage beside the waterfall that flowed from the lake. The night the snow finally stopped falling, the skies cleared until there wasn't a cloud to be seen, and the moon shined so brightly they say it was like the sun. The wind still blew fiercely, howling terribly through the forest, but the hunters had been up in the cottage for days, and they all wanted to breathe some of the outside air. They gathered their strength and went out, and just then—"

Everyone was listening intently. A log crackled faintly in the fire.

"—They heard a low, long howl. *Ooooo... ooooo...* it went, and they were all terribly afraid. There were spirits in the forests and mountains, they remembered, and so they decided to go back into the charcoal cottage. But the moment they tried to do so, the howl stopped. And then they looked toward the lake."

Vino's eyes glanced up at the ceiling, as though to evoke the hunters' gazes at the waterfall.

"And then in that moment they saw a silver, shining angel of pure white, a pair of wings on its back. From the bottom of the waterfall, it beat those wings, flying up through golden doors that had opened in the heavens."

His gaze finally fell, and he put his wine cup to his lips and seemed quite clearly embarrassed. No doubt he enjoyed this particular tale.

"Or so the story goes. It's been passed down as the legend of the angel ever since."

"I see..." Lawrence felt as though he could still see the angel flying up to the heavens on that moonlit night. Myths and superstitions were always extraordinary things. But because they still had a strange ring of reality to them, they were nonetheless passed down over the generations.

"But nobody's seen an angel since. I hear the story once reached town and our village was quite lively for a while, but lately all it's good for is making children happy." Vino's eyes narrowed in a self-deprecating smile.

"So, Mr. Vino, do you..."

"Hmm?"

"Do you think it's just a legend, too?" It was an unfair question to ask, but Lawrence asked it anyway.

"Well... Who knows, eh?" Unsurprisingly, Vino looked down at his hands, smiling bashfully. It seemed as though he wanted to believe, but was unable to quite bring himself to do so.

"As for us, we'd like to believe it."

"Ha-ha," laughed Vino, as though he was wondering what sort of a village they would be if they failed to believe their own legends. "Sometimes I go along with Mueller into town and hear all sorts of tales of gods and devils from poor villages like this one, and most

of them are nonsense. I heard one about glittering eyes that shone every night on a mountain, and it turned out to be a gold vein. So it was probably something like that for us, too. But..."

Vino stopped short, and for a moment he looked very tired. Lawrence had seen similar expressions many times before. It was the expression that came as the world's dark places were lit one by one, casting doubt upon things once embraced and making the world very different from the fantastical one within which it would be vastly preferable to live.

When Lawrence had left his village as a child, he too had been shocked as he had learned these things. Col seemed pained as he watched Vino, probably because his experiences of this process were much more recent. The only one looking at Vino unmoved was Holo.

But Lawrence very much doubted that her heart was at ease.

"If our village's angel legend is like that, too, well... that's a bit sad. Nothing to do about it, though." Vino shrugged and took a sip of wine. "The clever ones of the village say it must have been the snow, blowing up in the light to look like angels' wings. And perhaps that's really so."

Holo and Huskins alike knew what it was to be forgotten and left behind and to have to accommodate themselves to the human world, enduring constant trouble, unable to stand by and watch as humans severed their ties with the old world.

Lawrence hesitated to ask Vino any further questions. Everyone had times when they wished to return to being a child.

"Oh, and now I've shared this strange story with you important Church types. And here you probably hoped it was true, eh? But please don't think the good people of Taussig are unbelievers with no faith in angels, eh? Even I want to believe, after all!"

Lawrence smiled and nodded. If the villagers felt this way about the angel legend, it let them keep a bit of space between

themselves and the story of the witch. If Vino had been a truly hardheaded believer, he might have frozen up like the village elder at the first mention of said witch.

"Although...I don't know that I should ask you to believe in our angel legend."

"Hmm?" said Lawrence, which made Fran direct her gaze at him, too.

Vino stood with a quiet "Hup," then spoke in a practiced, careful tone. "The talk of the witch, you see. It's not unrelated to the legend of the angel," he said, not looking at a single one of them as he sheathed the knife with which he had eaten the venison at his belt. He scratched his nose and seemed to stare far away. Finally his attention returned, his face that of a hunter.

"Misfortune always comes from the outside. Mueller's always saying it."

Being the very definition of something that came from the outside, Lawrence could find nothing to say.

So he began preparing to take his leave, rushing Holo and Col—though not Fran, of course—through finishing their last bowls of stew.

After saying their regards to Mueller and the others who were busy tanning the deer hides in the square, Lawrence and company left the village led by Vino. Evidently there was a path that led from the village into the forest, but it wasn't one that horses or wagons could use. Heading out of the village, they would detour around the forest, up a now-unused path that ran along the river that flowed out of the lake.

The road commanded a view of the too-close mountains as it ran alongside the forested foothills, and it gave Lawrence a none-too-good feeling. The road felt likely to be swallowed up at any moment by the green that seemed to melt out of the mountains.

The wagon wheels slid over the snow on the road, and Lawrence wondered how much progress they were actually making.

Finally they reached the place where the stream emerged from the forest.

"Just go north from here. The riverbed's really wide, see? Used to be the river filled it up all the way, they say."

It was plenty wide enough to accommodate the wagon. And because the riverbed did not just seem like nothing but rocks beneath the snow, it must have been many years since the river had flowed through it.

"Still, I'm impressed that you go out to hunt in this weather. I was surprised to hear you'd gotten deer."

At Lawrence's careful words, Vino's face turned pleased and proud for the first time since they had left the village. "It's because you can see their tracks so clearly. Of course, they know that, too, and they know there are only certain places we can go in the snow, so they avoid those spots. But we're as clever as wolves, so we hide in snow; we become the air; and then, when the time comes, we strike!"

His boastful talk did not really suit the taciturn hunter image, but since there was one such hunter very close by, Lawrence smiled indulgently and left it at that. And anyway, even if it was not so, he was perfectly aware of just how dangerous it was to be disliked by the population of a snowy mountain village.

"But there's a lake, isn't there? Seems like animals would gather there."

"So you might think, but the hunting itself has been strange around here for years."

"What do you mean?"

"It's because of the witch. The forest around the lake is the witch's forest, and nobody from the village will go near it."

Lawrence found himself a bit taken aback at how readily Vino admitted to this.

Vino seemed to notice Lawrence's surprise, and his expression turned awkward. "Ah, this is just the sort of thing that makes people misunderstand. It's not that we really think there's a witch. Truly."

Lawrence glanced at Holo, but apparently Vino was not lying. It seemed the witch occupied a strange, ineffable position in the minds of the villagers of Taussig.

"So when you say 'witch,' you mean..."

"I hear originally it had to do with some important nun. Er..." Vino looked up at Fran on her horse.

Fran slowly looked back at him, then cocked her head curiously and smiled a gentle smile. "?"

"Ah, apologies. I can't seem to remember her name... but anyway, she existed. From a town called Enos on the Woam River?"

"Perhaps you mean Lenos and the Roam River."

"Ah, yes, that. Anyway, that's where she was, and she was beautiful and clever. She gave such wonderful sermons that even God would be enchanted by them, they say."

Holo looked over at Lawrence as she nodded. She could always be counted upon to react whenever talk of a beautiful woman came up.

Lawrence shrugged and then returned his attention to Vino.

"Her fervor reformed many a wicked heart. But because she preached every waking hour of every day, eventually she had run out of people in the town who needed to hear her message. So then she began to give her message to a different group."

Lawrence found himself hanging on Vino's words. He had done the same during the angel story—the man was a skilled storyteller. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why he had been put in charge of handling them.

"She began with birds and cats. Everyone in town praised her mercy and her charity. But then she began to preach to pigs and

rats, and then the wind began to change. Eventually the stray dogs that wandered the city began to chase her, and yet still she preached like a woman possessed. The people of the town wanted her to stop, but she wouldn't consider it. Then one day..."

Their footsteps crunched in the icy snow. Col was so taken in by the story that both of his hands were clenched into fists as he listened.

"...She vanished. Along with the dogs that had hounded her for her sermons."

Vino blew into his hands as though scattering downy feathers.

Col followed their imaginary path up into the sky with his gaze before hastily bringing his attention back down to earth.

"Er—then what happened? She disappeared and what happened to her?"

"Now, now, don't worry yourself so. This was a story Mueller heard in town. From here on out, it becomes the story as we saw it ourselves."

Ah, Lawrence thought. He had wondered how the story was so detailed. Apparently Mueller had been the village representative and had gone into town, hearing the tale while he was there. Then they had probably seen an eccentric nun passing through.

"It was the height of a hot summer. It was a terrible season. We were suffering out in the wheat fields, and insects swarmed everywhere. Maybe ten years ago, it was. That's when the nun came, wearing robes too thick even for winter. We were all astonished to see her because behind her trailed countless stray dogs."

Lawrence imagined a heavily dressed nun arriving with a procession of stray dogs behind her on a shimmering-hot summer day. It was a deeply eerie image.

Col grabbed on to Holo's robe.

"The elder said it was a fallen angel here to herald the end of days, falling over himself in his desperation. Ever since, he sits

out in front of the village, raising a great fuss whenever travelers come by."

"I'm very sorry to hear that..."

"Ah, he was such a bother then; it's a mercy he's quieter now. Anyway, back to the nun outside of town. Mueller was brave enough to go out to ask her what her intentions were—who she was, and where she came from, what she wanted. And this is how she answered."

She had heard that here was a path taken by an angel. It was as though they could hear her hoarse voice speaking.

"We realized she was talking about the legend of the angel that was connected to the forest and the lake. Even Mueller wanted to be rid of her, so we led her straight there. But—"

Lawrence was sure he could hear Col swallow nervously.

"—The moment we arrived at the forest, the nun ordered her dogs to attack. Here, here's the scar I got."

Vino bared his arm, showing it to Col, who, of all of them, was the most taken in by the tale.

Lawrence and Holo both peered over to get a look for themselves, and then their gazes met.

Neither of them said anything or betrayed any expression, but the scar was surely a strike from a club or stick. And it seemed quite old—undoubtedly from Vino's childhood.

But his tale was so entertaining that neither Holo nor Lawrence threw cold water on it.

"After that, she took the forest with her dogs and let none enter, living there as though it belonged to her. They were our best hunting grounds, but we had no choice but to find new places to hunt. A terrible story, is it not? That's why everyone calls her a witch. It's out of spite, and that's a fact."

"So, what happened to the witch?" Lawrence asked.

Vino sighed resentfully. "Who knows? No one's seen her for

years, so maybe she's gone somewhere else... But since no one will venture to check, there's no way to be sure. It's best to let sleeping dogs lie, after all, don't you think?"

Lawrence nodded slowly. Things were different for a traveling merchant who could easily move from one town to another. They could have a look and move on if conditions looked dangerous—but such options were not available to villagers.

"We don't want to invite any extra trouble, so we've just stopped going to the forest. Will you all really be all right staying the night there?"

Only those who had never faced the mountains at night and the true terror of the forest would mock their fear of the so-called witch. Even supposing the term *witch* was no more than a name they had settled on, fear was a natural reaction.

So Lawrence made sure to respond brightly, "Oh yes. After all, three of us are servants of God."

Fran and Holo looked the part, but Vino seemed not to understand about Col.

"He's an apprentice scribe, you see, training to copy the scriptures. It's a blessed vocation."

Vino seemed surprised and apologized. "Ah, excuse my rudeness."

"If anything, it's more dangerous for them to spend the night with me." It was a more obvious joke than it was clever. Vino laughed aloud, but Lawrence made a serious face. "Ah, that said..."

"Hmm?"

"If the worst happens and we return to the village during the night, please don't mistake us for the witch and chase us off, eh?"

Vino looked at Lawrence blankly for a moment. He then burst again into laughter. "Ha-ha, of course not! We're used to life in the mountains, and even some of us have come crying home

after our first night in the charcoal cottage. Our own children have to go into the mountains, so we smack them hard and send them back out. We won't treat you the same way, though."

Lawrence remembered the first time he went into the forest with his old master.

"The night road is dangerous, but every night has its dawn. I can tell you that much as a man of the mountains myself."

He was a good villager. Lawrence nodded at his words with a smile.

"Well, then," said Vino, taking a breath and bringing the jovial conversation to an end.

The scenery itself was a normal riverside road, which did not change for as far as it could be seen, up until the river took a turn out of sight, taking the road with it.

"If you follow this up, you'll come to the waterfall. Beyond that is the lake, and right before the waterfall should be the charcoal cottage. And if you decide you can't manage the stay, you can just come back to the village." These last words he spoke in a calm voice, every bit the practical village farmer. "God's blessing be with you."

Just what you would expect from a villager whose forest harbored the legend of an angel, Lawrence thought.

The earthen path that emerged from the forest by the riverside was very smooth. What bumps existed were smoothed by snow, such that the wagon traveled very easily over them.

Once Vino passed out of view, Holo hopped up to the driver's seat.

"I don't like it," were the first words out of her mouth. She had a small cask in her hand, which, if Lawrence's memory served, was distilled liquor for emergency purposes.

He tried to snatch it away from her, but Holo bared her teeth

intimidatingly. "We've gotten all she asked, and still she's so haughty."

Fran had taken the lead, as though she felt hurried. It was true they'd had no trouble getting the villagers to tell them their stories, but as Fran had said and Holo agreed, they had yet to learn the truth.

From that perspective, it was hardly surprising that Fran had little to say, but that did not improve Holo's mood. "Are you not irritated yourself?" she asked.

Lawrence drew back slightly. "If I got angry at every little thing, my body wouldn't be able to hold it all."

Holo shot him a glare as she gnawed at the edge of the cask, but she no doubt understood his logic.

Perhaps she was already drunk. Lawrence sighed heavily as the thought occurred to him. The cask was thrust roughly at him.

"You're too kind," said Holo.

"—Hey!"

Before Lawrence could stop her, Holo had returned to the wagon bed.

Lawrence wondered what she was on about, then he looked at the cask and realized. The plug had been removed but little of the contents had been emptied, so it seemed unlikely that Holo was drunk.

But Holo did have a selfish streak, and he decided she was merely being uncooperative. He replaced the plug in the cask and picked the reins back up.

Thereafter progress was steady, and when Fran finally stopped her horse, they found themselves in front of the little charcoal cottage that commanded a fine view of the waterfall, which despite the small volume of water was quite impressive.

The cottage was huddled beneath two large trees, perhaps because there could be heavy snowfall here. "Don't build a roof

on a roof," the old saying went, but in this case Lawrence felt it could be forgiven. The tree branches would handle snow removal themselves as they bent under the weight of accumulated snow.

Fran climbed down from her horse and approached the cottage without any particular hesitation. Given Vino's story about how the villagers had been driven away by dogs, Lawrence hastily came down from the driver's seat of the wagon.

"It's fine," said Fran as she opened the doors. She did it so smoothly and quickly that there was no chance to stop her.

Lawrence stood there stunned, and Holo came over, dragging Col behind her, whose gaze flicked around their surroundings worriedly.

"She seems to be rather certain of herself."

While he did not find Fran's every move to be irritating the way Holo did, Lawrence had to agree with her in this case. It seemed as though this was not Fran's first visit here.

Moreover, while the cottage seemed ancient, it didn't have the dusty, dingy feeling of a place that had gone unused for long years. Vino claimed that the villagers no longer entered the forest, but Lawrence was postponing his belief in that particular story.

"Mr. Lawrence, our things," said Fran, her head emerging from within the cottage.

Lawrence felt as though he had returned to his apprentice days. "I'll get them right away," he replied. And then, as he passed Holo on the way—"Don't fight with her."

He got a kick for his trouble, but Col's face brightened at this when previously he had been visibly scared of the witch, so perhaps it was for the best.

Lawrence carried item after item back from the wagon bed, arranging them inside the cottage according to Fran's direction. Food, wine, blankets, and firewood for four people was quite a lot of material, so when he finished bringing it all in, he had worked

up a good sweat—but it all fit perfectly in the cottage, neither too much nor too little.

Moreover, while the interior of the cottage was a bit dusty, there were no spiderwebs, and the planks were free from rot, and the tidy little roof was even without holes.

Someone had to be visiting regularly to perform maintenance and cleaning. Had the last visit been before the snowfall?

Lawrence wondered about it as he wiped sweat from his brow. Holo looked into the room from a passage that led to another room farther in, her head pushing aside a hanging animal skin that divided the two rooms and could not have been there for very long.

"Where's the fool?"

She meant Fran. Lawrence pointed outside. "She went to fetch her silversmithing tools from the wagon. I suppose she didn't want me touching them."

"Mm." Holo nodded, cracking her neck audibly.

"Where's Col?" Lawrence did not joke about her having again left him somewhere.

"You'll find out when you come back here." Holo let the skin partition fall and hide her face, and Lawrence heard her footsteps disappear farther into the room.

Just as he was wondering what was back there, Fran returned. Her chisel, hammer, rasp, bellows, and anvil were each small, but taken together accounted for a goodly weight. Fran had impressively packed them all up and hefted them over her shoulder. When she traveled alone, just what sorts of treacherous mountain roads did she face with such aplomb?

She seemed so well accustomed to the load that Lawrence could easily imagine it.

"The other two are in the back?"

"Yes. Ah, let me help you." It was harder to set down a heavy load than it was to carry it.

But Fran shook her head and bent at the knees, well used to the process of setting the tools down.

How many times had Lawrence's master scolded him for picking up or putting down heavy loads with his back? It was all too easy for such labor to result in pain. Physical labor had its own sort of wisdom to it, and Lawrence wondered where she had picked it up.

"Is there something more back there?" Lawrence asked Fran as she got out the straw and flint needed to light a fire, but she did not immediately answer. Instead, she faced him with the straw and flint and then looked meaningfully at the hearth. Lawrence could only assume she meant him to busy himself with starting a fire, but seen from outside, he imagined it looked rather pathetic for him to be ordered around so.

But he took the stone and straw and knelt down in front of the hearth to attend to the fire. It was then that she answered him.

"You'll understand when you see. Anyway, I'll need to borrow something."

"...Huh?" Lawrence did not even have time to ask what she wanted to borrow before Fran disappeared behind the skin partition. He wondered what she could be referring to as he started the fire. Presently, two sets of footsteps approached him.

"You'll be cold dressed like that. Put these on." Fran produced a pair of fine boots from her things and presented them to Col.

They were made from several layers of beautifully tanned leather, and buying them would have cost a good amount. Col accepted the boots, looking at Lawrence uncertainly. Lawrence nodded—it was not as though Fran was going to eat the boy when he put them on.

"We'll be back before sunset. Can I leave dinner in your hands?"

Lawrence was the one who needed her to draw him a map of

the northlands, so he had little room to refuse her. Far from it—that she had said anything at all made it feel like she was opening up a little bit, so Lawrence answered in a pleasant affirmative. Holo might have been irritated at him had she been there, but Fran nodded and took Col's hand, leading him outside, his boots clunking against the floor as he went.

Once Lawrence had the fire good and lit, he stood up and headed for the back room.

The floor of the hallway was plain earth, and even with boots on, he could tell how cold the air was. And yet, here too it was neat and tidy and free from cobwebs. Strangely, there was not even a single mouse hole gnawed in the walls.

Lawrence looked this way and that as he entered the room where the hallway led, and there he found Holo, sitting on a chair, regarding an old Church crest that was leaning against the wall.

"Huh?" That was all wrong—Holo was standing in front of the bookshelf, sniffing at the dusty books there.

So who was sitting in the chair?

Lawrence looked back again, and thanks to the sliver of light that made it through a crack in the wooden window, he realized that the figure in the chair was slightly taller than Holo, her hood was worn, and the hem of her robe was riddled with patches.

"I expect this is the 'witch' the villagers were on about," Holo said casually, returning a book to the shelf and then poking the figure in the head.

"H-hey!"

"What? It's fine. She's long since dried out. I thought Col might be frightened, but he's a stronger lad than I reckoned."

In places closed off by snow, it was not uncommon to encounter desiccated corpses from time to time. This led Lawrence to wonder if Col had been taken out on a mountain search.

"Still, to die gazing at a symbol of the Church... hard to imagine she was a witch."

"Col says she was a rather well-known person."

"Oh?"

The shelves in the room were all full of books and bundles of parchment. There was no mistaking it any longer.

After the nun came here on her eccentric journey, there was someone else who had come to adore her and was still coming to this place even after her death. Otherwise the books would not be so orderly, the cottage so clean and tidy.

Lawrence put his hands together lightly and offered a short prayer for the dead nun before turning his attention to the papers on the desk. They were dusty and aging, but the letters on them could still be made out. Evidently there had been an inquiry into her faith. It seemed that while she was alive her religious fervor had caused her to be viewed with suspicion, but she may very well have been a simple nun.

A single look at the wildflower arranged at the corner of the desk dismissed all worries of her being a witch.

"Still, you."

"Hmm?"

Holo was again looking intently at the contents of the bookshelf, and she pointed to one of the shelves in particular.

"Have a look at this."

"Where?"

Lawrence looked at the shelf, where there was a space just large enough for one missing volume.

"It must be somewhere else, right?"

"Fool. Have a look at the dust. It's different there than elsewhere."

No matter how thoroughly a room was cleaned, dust would settle in it. And when Lawrence looked closely at the gap, he saw



that while there was indeed a thin layer of dust there, it was less than elsewhere.

"I don't know how long ago, but at some point someone took a single volume from here."

"So what are you saying?"

Holo gave the room another brief look and then regarded Lawrence suspiciously.

"You've figured it out, haven't you? Someone's been coming here."

She was referring to the onetime residence of the nun. Vino the villager had said no one would approach it. But as Holo had not called him out, there was no reason to believe he was lying. Which meant it had to be someone unrelated to the village. Or a villager of whose actions Vino was unaware.

And what book had been taken?

"That little fool knew of this place before we came here," said Holo finally, glaring at Lawrence. "Don't let your guard down," her eyes said.

"I know. But where did she say she was going with Col?"

"Hmm. She said she was going to have a look at the lake."

"The lake?"

"Don't ask me why. I've no idea."

Given her displeasure, Holo was probably irritated at Fran's ordering around of not only Lawrence, but Col as well. But then he hit upon an idea.

"Shall we go look as well?" he said, at which Holo brightened.

"Mm. You seem to have gotten a bit cleverer," she said, taking his arm cheerily.

Lawrence had but a moment to chuckle at Holo's rare moment of misunderstanding before she began to drag him bodily out of the cottage. "H-hey!"

She refused listen to him and paid the redly burning hearth

no mind, silently making for the front door. Holo only stopped when Lawrence found his vision blurred by the brightly shining snow.

"What do you make of the dried-out nun, eh?"

It was not that bright outside. His vision blurred from the reflected light only because it had been so dim inside the cottage. Lawrence held a hand up to shade his eyes, squinting to look at Holo. "What do you mean, 'What'?"

"I can't imagine the term *witch* is very apt, myself."

Holo did not know much about the Church or the faith of its adherents, but her impression seemed to be very clear. And yet Lawrence had gotten quite a strong impression from the single dried flower on the nun's desk, and he was similarly unable to see her as a witch.

"Nor do I. You saw the flower on her desk, right?" said Lawrence, but Holo did not seem to understand what he was getting at. Perhaps it didn't much matter to her one way or another if the woman had been a witch.

Holo tugged again on his arm as he thought on it. "I've seen human females of her like many times before. The word *kind-hearted* may as well have been invented to describe them."

Come to think of it, Lawrence seemed to recall Holo saying something similar when they had first met. He nodded, and Holo slowly began to walk—her face downcast as usual.

"She was one of their like. Or so I suppose."

"Ah," said Lawrence, but instead of prompting her to go on, he simply took her hand.

"And, you know..."

"Hmm?"

Holo nodded and went on. "They say she led her wild dogs into the forest." She looked up with an unexpectedly hard expression. Something about it made Lawrence feel she was fighting to hold

back tears. "But they may just as well have been wolves, eh? So tread lightly, you."

Lawrence's heart skipped a beat.

Holo let go of his arm and went skipping off ahead. Knowing full well there were no other people nearby, she let her tail slip free from beneath the hem of her robe. Its white tip was as beautiful as the white snow over which it danced, like a fairy's sash of light.

"Well, I must say I understand our dried-out nun's feelings." She clasped her hands behind her and then spun around to face Lawrence with her usual invincible, good-humored smile. White snow fell on mossy rocks with a background of an aquamarine waterfall. For a path supposedly taken by an angel ascending to the heavens, it certainly looked the part.

"Why's that?" Lawrence asked, taking her small, chilly hand and following her.

"We're both patient but overreact in equal measure to our stored-up frustration," said Holo with a self-reproachful smile.

Lawrence looked at a rock that was jutting so far out it seemed about to fall at any moment and replied, "Like jumping naked into the wagon bed of a traveling merchant?"

"Or heading south in search of a friend."

Lawrence wanted to reach his hand out to Holo's face but thought better of it. Ever since arriving in the snowy mountains, Holo had surely been thinking about it. What would she do after they arrived in Yoitsu? The remains of one possible choice lay back in that cottage and in the reaction of the surrounding villagers. He just could not get used to her lightly frolicsome mood.

Lawrence and Holo held hands and made their way slowly around the waterfall. It seemed as though they might walk without any particular goal, but Fran's and Col's footprints ran there, so Lawrence and Holo followed them.

It was as though they were looking for some kind of precedent, any kind—but to say it aloud would be far too sentimental. As the thought occurred to Lawrence, he looked at Holo, and she lifted her gaze from the footprints in front of them and met his. He wondered if she was thinking the same thing.

She had long since kicked such worries aside, though.

That was the right answer, but above all they would avoid regret this way.

Lawrence squeezed Holo's hand a bit tighter as the thought struck him.

"So, is the story that an angel passed this way true?"

The path that led to the lake wound around the side of the waterfall, and it seemed Fran and Col were up at its head.

Holo and Lawrence ran up the shortcut, and as they came suddenly face-to-face with the waterfall, Holo spoke. "If they were anything like you or Mr. Hugues, they might have been mistaken for an angel."

"Mmm...I did see a bird once on the island." Holo sniffed the air.

"How long would a scent even last?"

"Hmph. It was just a try. And anyway, even years later, I can still get a sense of the place. This doesn't have that feel. 'Tis a weak forest that humans might easily do as they wish to it."

The statement had a certain level of authority behind it, given that Holo had once led a pack that protected such a forest.

Holo seemed to notice Lawrence's concern and smiled a deliberately sharp-fanged smile. "It was probably just a drift of snow blown up into the air. You humans are cowards, but cowards invent the best monsters."

She sounded so amused as she said it that Lawrence wondered if she had personal experience. "Do you know of any?"

The path that zigzagged up the slope behind the waterfall was

surprisingly well made. Since they were following Col and Fran, progress was comparatively easy to make.

"Plenty from back when I lived among the wheat. When night fell, youngsters would get up to mischief in the fields. I'd say there were ten kinds of wheat monsters, at least."

Lawrence felt bad for the mischief-making youngsters but suddenly understood where many eerie stories must have originated.

"Though sometimes they saw monsters that had nothing to do with my kind." Holo had a nostalgic look in her eye.

"For example?"

"The one I'm remembering now was a boy who tripped and fell in the mountains and thought the sound of his own crying as it echoed through the valley was the howl of a monster. So then he got even more scared and cried louder."

"Oh, like that. But... ah... I see."

"Hmm?"

The path wound left, then right, and before they knew it, they were making good progress up the steep slope. Whoever had come up with this way of constructing a trail was very clever. They had come a good distance but were still only halfway.

"I just remembered the story of a famous miracle whose trick was revealed."

"Oh ho." A large tree root formed a steep step, so Lawrence climbed it first and then held out a hand to pull Holo up.

"It has to do with the northern campaign. Every traveler knows the story." Just as Lawrence began to talk, he suddenly paused. "But it involves the Church, so don't tell Col."

Holo's blank expression shifted to a mischievous smile. "Fortunately there's nothing else between us that needs to be kept a secret."

Lawrence could only smile ruefully, and at Holo's urging, he continued his story. "A famous troupe of knights was

participating in the campaign and was losing a fierce battle to pagan forces. As the sky grew red with approaching night, the knights' commander was about to order the retreat—when suddenly, a huge shadow covered the battlefield. The moment he looked up to see what it was, everyone there seemed to spot it. A huge, white Church crest drifting across the sky."

Lawrence looked up at the sky, which prompted Holo to do the same. She looked back down, her voice thoughtful. "Birds, weren't they?"

Always so clever. Lawrence nodded and continued, "That's right. A flock of birds migrating. But the knights took it as a sign that victory was assured and somehow, in the small amount of daylight left, managed to escape their poor position and win the day. The flag of the nation that was founded on that land has a red background with a white Church crest on it to commemorate that day. And thus had a miracle occurred. The end!"

So there was no small possibility that the angel legend had come from some sort of natural phenomenon. No doubt Fran had taken Col along to investigate just that possibility.

"Mm. But if so, how might one summon the angel again?"

They came around the last switchback and continued on to the top of the hill. Looking down, the waterfall's splash pool was strangely tiny.

"What a beautiful lake," said Holo in a bright voice, not the least bit winded.

The lake was like a mirror bordering the mountains, reflecting the gray clouds that threatened snow at any moment.

Unlike the riverbank below, there were many small rocks fringing the lake. The dusting of snow atop the small black rocks made for a lovely contrast.

The lake was mostly free of reeds and quite transparent, and it seemed entirely possible to walk all the way around

its edge. It would be easily navigable by boat and easy, too, to catch fish.

"I'd rather come in summertime," said Holo, and Lawrence could understand why.

"Can you swim?" Lawrence asked.

"Aye. 'Tis a lovely feeling, having most of one's weight borne by the water."

Lawrence could not help but smile at the thought of a wolf so huge it could eat a human in a single bite jumping into a lake and swimming about like a dog. "But if you jumped into the lake in that huge body of yours, all the water would overflow."

In reality, it was the water from the waterfall that caused the lake to overflow. Lawrence had meant it as a little joke, but Holo fell silent, her expression serious.

"But if I were to jump in with this body, then *you'd* be the one to overflow."

She was like a boomerang. Lawrence ignored her; she replied with a deep breath, which she then exhaled.

Taking a walk around such a beautiful lakefront was quite a luxury for a busy traveling merchant. "I suppose Col and Fran must have gone quite a ways."

Their footprints seemed to go all the way around to the foggy opposite shore that lay at the foot of a tall mountain, its peak entirely obscured by clouds.

"Mm," Holo muttered noncommittally, looking at the waterfall to which they had walked.

"Is something the matter?"

"Mm. This waterfall may be quite new."

"Huh?" Lawrence said, and Holo nodded after taking another glance around their surroundings.

"I suppose you humans wouldn't exactly call it recent, but look, there. Does it not look as though that cliff collapsed?" Holo said,

pointing at the base of the mountain by the waterfall. "The rocks or whatever fell from there piled up to create the waterfall spot. The lake was originally bowl shaped and surrounded by mountains like so." She made a circle with her arms, perfectly demonstrating what she meant.

It did seem like the sort of thing that Holo, who had lived for centuries, was likely to know.

"But if the river level dropped, that means..."

"That's why. You can't fill a chipped bowl past the edge of its chip. If the water rises, it will drain down to that level."

Now that she pointed it out, Lawrence saw that there was a sharp rock at the top of the waterfall that divided its flow in two, and it looked as though it had been somehow stuck there after the fact.

Perhaps someone had seen the moment of that landslide and mistaken it for the angel's ascension. Lawrence thought about it and decided it was unlikely. It was hard, after all, to mistake falling rocks for an angel's wings.

"Or perhaps the angel made a foothold so that it could leap up into the heavens from it," said Lawrence a bit affectedly, at which Holo made a face and pulled away.

"You truly are a dreamer," she said, heaving a great sigh.

They prepared dinner and waited, and when Col and Fran finally returned, they were soaking wet, as though they had played around in the snow all day. Their bodies had stayed warm beneath their coats, but their arms and legs were like sticks of ice.

Holo reluctantly covered Fran's hands with her own and placed her feet against Fran's feet because the best way to warm someone up was with another body. Lawrence stuck Col's hands underneath his own coat and warmed the boy's feet up with his own hands.

"So, did you find anything?"

Col's fine, layered leather boots had soaked up so much water they were like lead. Wherever they had gone must have had thick snow, so they would have needed good reason to be there, Lawrence reasoned—but Fran shook her head. She looked a bit sad as she did so, perhaps out of exhaustion.

"Well, once you're settled in, we'll have dinner."

At these words, Col nodded. Lawrence looked at him and saw him begin to nod off now that he was suddenly in a much warmer place.

Lawrence removed Col's wet coat and replaced it with a dry blanket, wrapping it around Col's arms. He was a bit smaller than Holo, so it was easily managed. He smelled faintly musty. Perhaps after having spent so much time around Holo, he was beginning to take on a hint of her scent.

Fran's limbs seemed to finally thaw, and she said a brief word of thanks to Holo before drawing her arms and legs back in toward herself.

"You have a fine traveling companion," she said as she accepted a bowlful of the pot's contents.

When Lawrence realized she was talking about Col, he smiled. "He's been a great help to us. Though it seems he was a bit short on stamina today."

Col looked frail and thin, but he had been perfectly fine managing winter travel with thin, meager clothing, and his endurance was at least equal to Lawrence's, perhaps better. If they had walked around enough to tire him out so thoroughly, then it might be that Fran was the exceptional one.

"Not at all...," said Fran, sipping the soup. Even when eating, she seemed to have a certain aura about her.

Anyone who came inside after wandering around in the cold all day would have a moment of unguarded relief—but not Fran. Her alertness reminded Lawrence of some forest animal.

"By the way, we did some thinking about the legend of the angel," said Lawrence as he filled Holo's bowl with meat, at which Fran's hand froze. "Have you ever seen the flag of the Torhildt Republic?"

Fran's eyes were fixed intently on Lawrence. She had taken the bait more thoroughly than he had anticipated.

"... Have you knowledge of the story?"

"Some." The ember of her interest, so bright before, seemed to have gone out. Fran did not elaborate and sipped her soup as though deliberately regaining her composure. She cut the contents of the bowl up with her wooden spoon and then ate them, carefully scooping the last bite up and bringing it to her mouth.

Her every movement was smooth and efficient, and she ate rather quickly.

The higher in status one rose, the slower one tended to take one's meals—and so went the opposite. Col was a perfect example, being a traveling scholar whose eating was mostly indistinguishable from that of a thief or beggar.

According to Hugues, Fran had identified herself as a former slave. Perhaps that was true, Lawrence mused.

"I suppose I also think it was a bit of snow or something being blown up on the wind," she said. The same thing Vino the villager said. Going by boring common sense, it was the most reasonable response.

"Or maybe the real thing."

Fran revealed a surprisingly honest smile at Lawrence's joke. "That would certainly be the best answer. However..."

"... I understand you've investigated too many legends to truly believe that."

Fran's eyes closed and her smile vanished. Her slow breathing made it seem as though she were trying to control her anger, but

Lawrence felt it was just the opposite. She was trying to keep herself from laughing.

Her slow breathing stopped, and she exhaled. Her expression was soft, just as Lawrence had expected. "That's right. Most were shams. A few were from people who mistook what they saw and jumped to conclusions. And still fewer were truly special, truly real, as though something genuinely extraordinary had happened there."

"And which do you suppose this is?" Lawrence asked, at which Fran shook her head. It seemed like she was both giving her answer and admitting that she did not know.

But Fran's gaze went into the distance and suddenly she spoke. "I originally heard the angel legend from a dear friend."

Lawrence was surprised. He had not expected Fran to talk about such a thing. Fran herself seemed to understand this. She glanced at him, embarrassed, a slight bashfulness playing about the corners of her mouth.

"They admitted they could not remember where they'd seen it. But what they told me about was largely the same as this legend."

Eyes that looked into the past were always sad. In front of the flickering light of the hearth, this was doubly true.

"They exaggerate, but they don't lie. And after so many years..."

"You think you've finally found out."

Fran nodded and relaxed her sitting posture a bit. It seemed to Lawrence that she had finally taken down some of the barriers she had built. He offered her some wine.

Fran took it without much hesitation. "I can't bring myself to believe that the legend here is nonsense. I believe it exists and is something that can be seen. The—" Fran's gaze moved to the rough, tanned skin hanging over the entrance to the back room. "—The nun there believed in it and came here."

Her faith had caused her to be driven from towns and villages and to be dubbed a witch. It was hard to imagine someone with such deep faith, no matter how eccentric she might be, following a truly phony legend. Such legends and stories were countless. Only a truly special occurrence would remain in minds and capture hearts the way this one had.

"I do believe my friend saw it as well. Something that could be called a miracle..." Her eyes were slightly downcast, a sad smile on her face that was not merely a trick of the hearth's flickering shadows. "But it is to laugh... to see such a thing and not remember where you saw it."

Her smile was an almost exasperated one.

Any man would find himself faintly jealous seeing such a smile. Lawrence wondered if she was fond of the person she was talking about. Her use of the word *friend* felt like an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

But with this, it seemed as though Fran's desire to discover the truth behind the legend was not merely out of passion as a silversmith. She had another reason in her heart, and that was what had driven her to come all this way.

In any case, Fran's smile was full of shadows.

"Ah, I shouldn't," said Fran, putting her wine cup down. She had not drunk much, but perhaps she lacked much tolerance for drink. Or perhaps she was more worried about the temptation to let it loosen her tongue so that she would spill the contents of her heart.

Silence fell.

Lawrence could not help but ask, "Why would you tell me this?"

Her reply was quick. "As an apology."

"An apology?" Lawrence echoed, hearing a derisive sniff from behind him.

He looked and saw Holo glaring at Fran with suspicious eyes.



"Back at the trading company..."

Had something happened that required an apology? Was she talking about her utter intractability? Even so, an apology would be strange, so Lawrence just sat there stupidly as Fran looked into her reflection in the wine cup on the floor and continued.

"I could have spoken with you differently. I thought you were merely another greedy merchant."

"No, that's quite all right..."

"I thought you only wanted a map of the north so you could profit from it." Fran looked up and smiled apologetically.

Lawrence had told her the previous night that he wanted the map in order to help Holo. So what reason did she have for apologizing? She was apologizing not for her response, but rather the manner of her response. What a strange notion.

Lawrence remained at a loss, and it was finally Holo who spoke up. "So what was it that changed your mind, eh?" Her tone was still a bit harsh, but she seemed amused, too. Looking at her face, Lawrence saw that she seemed in better spirits and wore a faint smile.

Fran drew back deliberately at the question and regarded Holo silently. For a while, the two girls seemed to have a conversation entirely with their eyes.

"Now that we've come this far, you wish our help, perhaps?"

Fran nodded slowly.

Lawrence still had no idea what they were talking about, but at the familiar sound of the word *help*, he started to see where this was going. But before he could interject, Holo spoke.

"Aye, fine then." The haste with which Holo agreed reminded him of his own failure at the Hugues Company. Lawrence could not help but open his mouth to speak, but then Holo slapped his

back. "We're asking for your help as well, so 'tis hardly the time for holding grudges."

Her exasperated smile had a strangely good humor to it.

Across the hearth, Fran seemed happy.

Lawrence did not really understand why, but it seemed best to leave things as they were. He nodded.

"Well, then," murmured Fran, her dark eyes shining with intelligence. "Did you notice anything strange when we arrived in Taussig?"

"As a merchant?"

"Yes."

Lawrence nodded. "They were grinding flour by hand...even though there's such a high waterfall so close by."

Fran gave Lawrence a long, hard look. He had been right.

Lawrence continued.

"In springtime when the thaw comes, there would be plenty of water for a waterwheel, and it's not so very far from the village. So the only reason the landlord wouldn't have built a mill is out of pity for the villagers, or..."

"Or if the villagers themselves resisted the idea. And the answer is indeed the latter." As she spoke, Fran reached into her things and produced a dusty, old book.

It was more a stack of papers than a book so unmatched and disorganized were the parchments and letters that comprised it. Even a brief glance made it clear that it was very old. The pages rustled weakly as she flipped through them.

"The village originally used the legend of the angel as a reason not to build a water mill," she said matter-of-factly.

"That's..."

"If a mill were built, it would be for extracting more labor from the villagers—they would have been made to construct the very tool that would choke them. Meanwhile, the northern campaigns

were reaching their peak, the landlord, wanting to borrow the Church's might, took the profit of using the legend of the angel to flatter the Church over the profit of the increased output of a water mill."

It was often the case that a landlord would lack sufficient military or financial power to protect his own holdings. Fran went on.

"But as times changed, the pagans grew stronger. I assume you know that the northern campaign has been canceled."

Lawrence nodded. "In other words," he said, "with the recent decline of Church power, things can turn bad if the landlord gets a whiff of their involvement."

"Yes. In the past, money was made in providing the northern campaign with supplies, but...lacking shame or concern, and any sort of fear of God, the attitude has changed completely. As you might imagine, in an area like this with so many pagan landlords, it can be dangerous to appease the Church while its power is on the decline. So far their reaction has gone well."

If you can't beat them, join them. It was hardly a bad strategy for a long life. However, sometimes it would only make you look like a coward.

"After much worrying, the landlord hit upon an idea. Claim the devout nun who came all the way out here chasing the angel legend was a witch."

Lawrence drew in breath, but he was the only one. Holo's expression did not so much as twitch. She knew in her bones just how selfish humans could be.

"By claiming a witch had come and was causing trouble, he wouldn't have to defy the Church, but could save face with the villagers. And for the villagers themselves it was awfully convenient; since they didn't want to build a water mill, a witch in the forest gave them the perfect excuse not to enter it. A mill would

mean increased taxation, which would instantly make their lives much harder."

This also explained why they treated salt as such a precious substance. But there was still something Lawrence did not understand.

"Miss Fran... where did you learn all of this?"

In response to his question, Fran casually held up the book. On its opened pages, Lawrence could see writing in a neat, masculine hand.

"It's all written right here. This is the diary of Katerina Lucci, the nun laid to rest in the next room."

A single book had been missing from the shelf. This book.

"I expect one of the villagers had an attack of conscience and wanted to let the world know the truth. It's a total coincidence that it should end up in my hands. An acquaintance of mine who handles such things just happened to mention it."

She flipped through the pages, her eyes glancing over them. She was not reading the pages, instead perhaps trying to guess at the thoughts of the woman who had written them.

"But if that's true... why would you tell us? I mean, to begin with..." Lawrence trailed off.

If she knew so much about the landlord, then Fran's reason for bringing Lawrence along was not simply to help her learn about the angel legend.

Lawrence looked at Fran dubiously. She had been planning to set them up all along.

He felt like the corners of her eyes crinkled just a bit in a mischievous smile. "It won't be long before the bells ring and the Church arrives."

A powerful faction was like a big fish. When it moved, water rippled around it, splashing up onto the ground. And the world was one big pond.

"So it's the Debau Company, eh?"

Fran's eyes widened in surprise, and she nodded. "So you're familiar. As you've guessed, if the Church comes again, the claim that there's a witch in their domain won't work. So this is an extremely dangerous place."

That much was certainly true.

If the Church came into a volatile situation like this, it would be difficult for Fran to handle it alone, no matter how perversely stubborn she might be.

Fran regarded Lawrence. "The villagers and landlord alike are probably terrified that an investigation into the witch rumors would be a precursor to another round of Church attacks on the north," she said.

"So what we need to do is act such that we calm those fears."

Perhaps something about the way Lawrence spoke was amusing to her, for Fran displayed a quiet smile. But there was a disparity between her smile and the words she spoke next. "On our way back around the lakeside, there was someone observing this place."

This was why Fran had been willing to compromise.

It was such an obvious reason that Lawrence wanted to sigh. But he swallowed it back; it did not often happen that he got what he wanted taking the easy path.

"Naturally I'm not asking you to stay here with me from here on. Just until the snow melts will be fine. I expect the legend of the angel only applies in wintertime."

"And then you'll draw us a map of the north?"

Fran nodded. "So you'll help me, then?"

If they failed to pack their things and leave immediately, they would lose what little room to maneuver they had. But Fran had let them in on the secret, *then* asked for help.

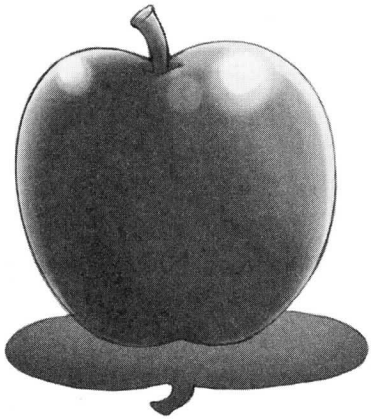
It was a cunning move. Like a battlefield general.

He needed that map of the north, and there was Hugues to consider. Knowing the situation, Lawrence could not very well leave Fran on her own here.

Time-wise it would be a hardship to wait for spring, but depending on how circumstances changed, he might have another chance to negotiate. Holo did not move, so the answer was clear.

"Of course," said Lawrence shortly.

CHAPTER FOUR



The next day of their stay, Fran again took Col with her and made for the lake.

Lawrence worried that if someone was watching them, it would be unsafe to leave the cottage, but Fran dismissed this, saying, "It's no different than if we were in the cottage." If anything, she said, it was safer, since it would reinforce the idea that they had come not to investigate the witch, but the angel legend.

Logically speaking, that was true enough, yet Lawrence was about to insist that it was still too dangerous—and oddly enough, it was Holo who restrained him. Moreover, she then suggested that Fran take Col with her.

Col readily agreed, of course, since he also felt that Fran should not go alone, which Lawrence found strange.

This was a complete change from Holo's previous state of finding everything Fran said irritating. Had their conversation with Fran last night changed her view so much?

What *had* become clear the previous night was that Fran had planned to take advantage of them all along when she brought them here, which ought to have worsened their impression of her—and certainly wouldn't improve it.

When Lawrence came back from seeing Col and Fran off, he found Holo slowly and deliberately grooming her tail.

Lawrence watched her and decided to try a mildly probing statement.

"I imagine she was thinking only of the legend last night, eh?"

After finger combing the whole of her tail, she began to pluck individual pests off and toss them into the hearth. She gave Lawrence only a desultory ear's worth of attention.

"Mm?"

"She said as much to Col, didn't she? 'Let's not miss any hints of the legend,' she said."

"Ah, mm."

Fran, too, seemed to have concluded that the angel had to have been some sort of natural phenomenon and had listed all sorts of possibilities to Col—from accumulated snow blowing off a tree branch to water from a hot spring flowing into the lake and causing steam to rise in a wing-shaped pattern.

And it was true that the angel wing phenomenon had to be caused either by something falling from a high place or rising from a low place.

If falling, then the top of the waterfall, with the great difference from top to bottom, seemed the likelier candidate. If rising, then either steam, mist, or billowing snow was not difficult to imagine.

His assistance requested, Col had listened intently to each possibility in turn, nodding as though promising not to miss a single detail as he headed out with Fran.

"It's true that so long as she seems so serious, neither the villagers nor the landlord can very well come out and quibble with her," said Lawrence.

He expected Holo to come back with a complaint about Fran being perfectly willing to order her around, but evidently she was not in the mood.

If anything, Holo seemed pleased as she spoke. "'Tis rather absurd for her to have such a reputation as a perverse, stubborn silversmith."

"...Oh?'

Fran was entirely unlike what he had imagined when he first heard of her, but she was the very image of a serious artisan. She had probably been up thinking about her plans all night and had gone out immediately upon the arrival of morning, without any concern for the danger.

Lawrence said as much to Holo, but she only chewed at the roots of her tail fur, flashing a sharp smile when it was properly fluffy. "I expect she's simply chasing after whoever it is she's in love with. That strikes me as neither perverse nor particularly stubborn."

Holo was talking about the person Fran had mentioned the previous night—the one who had first told her the legend of the angel. Whether or not it was true romance or simply unrequited love on Fran's part, Holo and Lawrence seemed to be of a mind on the subject.

And to put it as flatly as Holo did, it was true that *perversely stubborn* was not, perhaps, the right term. In Fran's position, girls the world over could more accurately be described as "single-minded."

"'Tis rather charming, is it not?"

"I suppose." Lawrence very much doubted that Fran had been lying the previous night. Given that, she started to seem to him like a maiden who goes on pilgrimage to pray for her love, who's gone off to war.

And yet Lawrence still did not understand something. Why had her confession taken the form of an apology for her poor treatment of him at the trading company, and why had Holo's disposition toward Fran improved so much despite the knowledge that she had set out to trap them from the beginning?

He idly poked at the fire in the hearth as he turned the matter over in his mind. It was then that Holo spoke up.

"And to use an apology to deliver such a story. Rather clever of her, was it not?" A large spark flew up into the air—mostly coincidentally—but it looked as though it had jumped in reaction to his own fluster, which was also true.

Lawrence directed his gaze from the hearth to Holo, who was grinning widely, though it was a stiff, unnatural smile.

"Of course, you do know why it was so clever, don't you?"

Lawrence realized it was the height of presumption to think he had been able to hide his ignorance from her. If he had to confess, sooner was better. "...Sorry. I have no idea."

"Fool!" Her face turned so fierce it seemed it would blow all the sparks in the hearth up at once. Her stiff smile vanished, replaced by a look of utter anger.

"Wh-why are you so—"

"Fool! So you're saying you've no notion of why I found her so irritating, either?!"

If she had shouted at him with such force in her wolf form, she would have destroyed the cottage from the inside. Holo's anger was enough to cause such irrelevant thoughts to cross his mind. He had never seen her tail as puffed up as it suddenly was.

"...Yes."

He had gone too far, and this was the fall.

Holo's lips trembled in outrage, and she finally slumped, as though defeated. It was as though she had burst a blood vessel out of sheer rage.

Lawrence hastily tried to say something, but she gave him such a sharp glare from underneath her bangs that he snapped his mouth shut almost as soon as he opened it.

"Well...I suppose that's the sort of dunce you always were..." Holo sighed a long-suffering sigh and closed her eyes, whereupon

the malice seemed to drain out of her. "I was the only one who was angry. She was the only one who was worried she'd gone too far. And you're not so much generous as you are about as insensitive as a corpse."

At this point, Lawrence could hardly help but feel irritated, despite still not knowing what this was all about. But before he could reply, Holo continued.

"You were utterly disgraced!"

Lawrence thought back to the trading company, but still did not understand and looked at Holo with eyes more pleading than Col would ever direct at her. Holo the Wisewolf bared her fangs in contempt and then turned away.

"And right in front of me, no less."

"—Ah..." In that instant, everything connected in his mind.

"Yet still you flail around like some sort of simpleton..."

Holo slumped in utter frustration, seemingly about to collapse sideways at any moment. It was Lawrence, meanwhile, who wanted to stand, but Holo's eyes stitched him in place, like a dog ordered to sit.

"If you dare speak now, I'll show you my true ire."

Lawrence's mouth snapped shut as though nailed that way, but the words swirled around in his chest with such energy that his hands trembled of their own accord.

Holo was angry that he had been so easily outmaneuvered by Fran back at Hugues's shop, yes—but what she was truly furious at was that he had done so in front of her very eyes. Given that, he started to see why she had agreed to Fran's vague conditions. It was not out of amusement at Fran's cleverness. Holo was planning to intervene.

This was why she had complained at Fran's silence during the entire time Lawrence had so shrewdly gotten Vino to tell them the whole story and guide them all the way out

here—because she was angry not only at Fran but also at the clueless Lawrence.

Aren't you angry at being made such a fool of? she had been thinking. *Aren't you angry at being made the fool in front of none other than me?*

And then had come the conversation last night.

Lawrence recalled every word Fran spoke, along with every one of Holo's reactions. Immediately, he held his head in his hands, as though enduring a terrible headache, overwhelmed at his own stupidity.

Fran was chasing the legend of the angel because of someone she loved. That was why she had confessed that fact as an apology—because Lawrence was chasing a map of the northlands for the very same reason.

No wonder Holo's mood had improved. And he could certainly understand why she felt the way she did now.

"...I'm sorry." He had been the only one blind to his own foolishness. He could neither blame Holo for her anger nor her exasperation.

"You truly do seem to move from one foolish act to the next."

He had nothing to say in his defense, but Holo seemed to have no further anger to express. It seemed his stupidity really had exhausted her rage.

Holo heaved a sigh and deliberately looked down at her tail. "That was surely more effective than any tiresome grooming." Her anger had caused it to puff up such that it was much fluffier than usual.

Lawrence knew that if he laughed he was likely to get his throat torn out, so he simply listened.

"Still, I suppose this sort of thing is not so uncommon in life," she said, arching her back in a stretch.

Lawrence was not so idiotic as to think they were still

discussing the same topic, but he was idiotic enough not to know what she was actually talking about. "...I don't follow you," he said.

Holo looked at him and smiled a self-deprecating smile. "Oh, just that even the ones that get worshipped as gods had the same troubles, that's all."

"Huh?"

"It happened quite often. I didn't much care one way or the other, but the village elders would scold the younger villagers if they bungled the festival preparations, striking them and saying they'd been rude to me, entirely unconcerned with how I might actually feel. I'd watch this all at a loss...and to think that I'd end up doing just the same thing."

Lawrence knew such situations arose when each party valued the other. But what was he supposed to say? Should he apologize? Or thank her?

Either one seemed foolish.

Lawrence remained silent, and Holo smiled a dry, little smile, then stood. "Though I suppose 'tis better to carefully consider the other's feelings and then act with the best of intentions. Though perhaps it will suffice to say that the person in question needn't worry about that."

She wore a malicious smile as she spoke, obviously still scolding Lawrence—though as punishment for making her look a fool, it was a cheap thing.

"The problem is," continued Holo, glancing at the hanging skin partition, "what to do when they're already a silent corpse."

Blasphemy against the dead was not so different from hearing about the oppression of innocent people—it demanded righteous anger.

Holo had said as much when they had started looking for the wolf bones: No matter how strong they had been, her kind couldn't

bite back in death. Yet somehow, Sister Katerina had happily accepted being called a witch. Perhaps she had just been eccentric.

But Lawrence did not think so, and neither, evidently, did Holo.

She had been kind, and she had accepted it.

"So—that is my reason for wanting to help the girl."

Back in the village of Pasloe, Holo had been forgotten, rendered as mute as a corpse. In the end, she was unable to endure this indignity. She had kicked the dust from her feet and left. But Katerina's name could still be restored.

As Lawrence thought about it, he noted a certain circular logic. Looking at Holo, he saw that the wisewolf had already realized this.

"Though if we go around saying this or that about someone who's died, we're no better than the villagers. And that dried-out corpse doesn't care what people call it. So my lending a hand is not much different than whoever it is that comes and cleans the cottage."

"It's useful for the living, though." After all, one could no more peer into the minds of the living than one could the dead, and there was certainly no way to act solely in the interests of another.

If you dug deeply enough, you would always arrive at the conclusion that you had acted in your own interests. The only problem was acting in such a way that you could live with yourself afterward.

"'Tis hard indeed to continue moving forward as you live. I do feel for the villagers and their landlord. And of course...," Holo said as she tucked her tail back underneath her robe and then hid her ears in her hood. "...You can't help but cheer for the girl who goes to such efforts for the sake of the one she loves, eh?"

Her words came with that same nasty smile, but they were not wrong. And if this was an indication of a desire to be properly mourned after death, then one had to laugh that they had decided to help Fran.

Lawrence and Holo smiled at each other from across the hearth.

Lawrence bet that if he said he had put too much firewood in the hearth, Holo would laugh and laugh.

Midday came, and soon Fran and Col returned.

Lawrence assumed they had come back for food, but that seemed not to be the case. No sooner did Fran enter the cottage than she pressed Lawrence with a question.

"Will you go to the village and have them draw me a map?"

"... A map?"

"Yes."

Despite the cold, Lawrence could see the sweat on her brow, which made it clear just how hurried they had been. Col had sat down immediately upon returning to the cottage and gulped water noisily from a water skin.

Holo brushed the snow off him like he was an unruly little boy, but he was too tired even to thank her.

Given the state Fran and Col were in, there were not very many possibilities as to the cause.

"Did you find a clue to the legend of the angel?"

No sooner had he asked the question than Lawrence found himself very surprised indeed. He imagined that applied to Holo as well, though she was still tending to Col.

The reason was Fran. As soon as she heard Lawrence's question, she smiled in genuine, unself-conscious delight. It was as though she could not hold it back any longer. The perversely stubborn silversmith. The silversmith of constant and unpleasant rumor. For this innocent, lovely smile to be waiting beneath all that, it had to be her true self.

For a woman to have traveled alone for so long and to have been so successful on the way, she must have suffered greatly. Even someone like Eve had to wear a scarf while doing business

to hide the fact that she was a woman. Fran wore the rumors of her nastiness and intractability like a suit of armor.

Col seemed to have caught his breath, so Holo took the water skin to Fran. It would have been unimaginable not long before, but Fran smiled a grateful smile, which Holo returned.

Fran drank, paused to breathe, then drank more.

They must have run hard. Toward the legend of the angel.

"When you say 'map,' what sort of map do you mean?"

Fran, having caught her breath, started slightly at Lawrence's question. "Hmm?" She looked at him blankly before comprehension finally seemed to dawn on her. She must have planned to tell him what kind of map she needed. "I'm sorry. I need... I need a map that shows how the rivers flow out from the lake."

"The river?" Lawrence asked. It was a strange map to ask for.

"Yes. Walking around the lake, something occurred to me. When it snows and the temperature drops suddenly, all the rivers and streams will freeze. Which means the destination of their flow is lost. Even that waterfall would freeze solid if there were enough snow and cold. But then eventually—well, no barrier will last forever. So I need a map that shows the flow of every stream, no matter how small."

The formerly taciturn Fran, who always seemed as though she were thinking two or three steps ahead of the conversation, was now energetic and voluble. Her expression was serious, but from her rambling words and rapid arm and leg movements, it was obvious she was in a hurry.

"The water would be full of ice and snow, and it would break through and overflow all at once. And it would look like—"

"It would look like the wings of an angel, I should think," said Fran, looking steadily at Lawrence.

She was full of conviction but so happy that she could not believe it herself—that was what she looked like.

The water and snow had been blocked up, unable to flow, and had then broken free one moonlit night. It would've been beautiful, Lawrence thought, and it was an entirely appropriate thing to have been mistaken for an angel's wings. Even knowing the truth, he could imagine calling the scene a miracle nonetheless.

Lawrence excused himself by reminding himself that he would normally never say such an irresponsible thing, and then he spoke to Fran. "I think that's probably it," he said.

Fran was nearly crying from happiness.

"I hope we get to see it."

It seemed to Lawrence that everyone who had ever single-mindedly pursued a goal had something in common: this smile.

"Yes!" replied Fran quickly and clearly.

Fran and Col headed out to the lake again. It seemed she could not bear to spare even the short amount of time it would take to fetch the map.

Col seemed to have been infected with Fran's excitement and followed her out, carrying their things with a seriousness he had never exhibited before.

Holo watched them go, a faintly sad smile playing about her lips. Perhaps she felt as though her favorite little brother were being stolen away.

"Well, then, I suppose we should be off ourselves," said Lawrence, putting his foot in the horse's stirrup.

Holo kept watching Fran and Col, but at these words she turned and came over, taking hold of Lawrence's arm.

He took a breath at the same time she did and lifted her up onto the horse's back. Lawrence followed her up, sitting right in front of her. Taking hold of the reins, he had the horse walk forward.

"She was like a child." Lawrence had to smile at the memory

of Fran. Even if he went back to Kerube and told Hugues of it, he doubted the man would believe him.

"'Tis even more childish to believe that an adult should greet a happy event with a calm face." Holo's arms were wrapped around Lawrence and her cheek pressed against his back so that when she talked, the movement of her ear and chin moved ticklishly against him.

"It's true that people become more childish as they get older," said Lawrence, wondering if he should have her sit in front of him.

"Mm. So you're wondering just how old I'll become, eh?" She had to be in a good mood to make such jokes. Lawrence laughed and Holo snickered as well, but once the wave of mirth had receded, Holo continued, more seriously. "This seems very important to her."

There by the hearth, Fran had spoken bashfully of someone she had called a friend. There had to be a reason she had come here without them.

Of course, it could very well be that this friend was an artisan in some town somewhere and unable to leave easily. But in this day and age, Lawrence could only imagine darker reasons.

By the way Fran had spoken, it sounded like there was a time when they had traveled together but had to separate during the journey.

The reason might have been injury, sickness, or worse.

Holo switched the cheek that was pressed against Lawrence's back from one side to the other. "And to see such a smile from her after she'd worn so thick a mask. I wonder what she would've done had we not been the ones to escort her? That little fool."

Lawrence sighed softly at Holo's words. "Indeed. They probably would've been scared off by her single-minded determination to

chase the angel legend, turned tail, and left her on her own. Such things happen quite often."

Those who feared danger would gain nothing. And yet, pressing on in the face of danger would eventually lead to disaster. If they were to play the part of the bringers of good fortune, they might as well bring it. Holo laughed; she understood this perfectly well.

"Well, she's got pluck enough to use Holo the Wisewolf of Yoitsu as her messenger. I'd say she's got good fortune to spare."

That was true enough. But it got Lawrence to thinking—just how lucky had he been to have Holo join him in his travels? The moment he thought about it, Holo seemed to see right through him, her cheek still pressed to his back. She chuckled an unpleasant, throaty chuckle. No doubt it had been part of her plan to sit behind him, leaving him nowhere to retreat.

"I'm fortunate indeed to have been blessed with such a wonderful traveling companion as yourself. There, are you happy?"

Holo raised her voice in a laugh. "And just who are you thanking?"

He had come along with her this far, so he had to see it through to the end. "Holo the Wisewolf of Yoitsu," he said, gripping the reins.

"Mm. Well, see to it that you stay good and thankful."

He heard the sound of her tail swishing.

Profit could warm his coin purse, but never his back. This sort of thing was nice once in a while.

Lawrence urged the horse on, feeling Holo's warmth behind him.

When they returned to the village, it seemed like a perfectly ordinary day.

Some villagers were tending crops, some led livestock, some mended clothing, and some beat cooking pots clean.

Lawrence noticed Holo narrow her eyes wistfully. This was a scene that they could see anywhere—that they could continue to see no matter where they traveled.

"Their lack of integrity angers me, but I can understand why they would wish to protect this," said Holo quietly and meaningfully.

"Indeed. And if Miss Fran is to be believed, there are even some villagers who didn't want to claim Sister Katerina was a witch. Perhaps they meant to gain some redemption by keeping her cottage clean."

It was exceedingly difficult to lead a straightforward, uncomplicated life. Holo remained silent—she understood that no single person was at fault, but was also unwilling to condone the situation.

"Well, if we do our job, the evil witch may well turn back into a pious nun. Then Fran will be able to dedicate herself to searching out the angel legend, she'll draw us our map of the northlands, and everyone will be happy. Right?"

The landlord would probably continue his maneuvering, using the nun's silent corpse as a new reason for the villagers to stay out of the forest. Holo was obviously unsatisfied with that, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Being a clever wolf, Holo could see there was nothing to be gained from anger and let her puffed-up cheeks deflate.

"So first things first—the map. It would be nice if we could track down Mr. Vino."

The villagers in the fields were all bent over doing their work, and it was impossible to tell who was who. Lawrence decided to head into the village center first.

The people working in their homes took note of them but

didn't seem particularly interested, recognizing them from the previous day's events. Perhaps Mueller or Vino had explained their circumstances.

Just as they were about to head for Vino's house, they came across him in the village square, crafting arrows with some other men. They each had a white arrowhead in their hands and were carving and polishing them with stones. They were probably made from bones taken from the deer they had felled the previous day.

"Mr. Vino," Lawrence called out.

Vino looked up and smiled when he realized who it was. He waved, set down the arrowhead he was working on, and trotted over to Lawrence. "Hey, there. You seem to have made it back safely."

"Yes, thank you. Making arrows, eh?" asked Lawrence.

Vino glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "Aye. It'll be spring soon, with humans and animals alike starting to stir. We'll shoulder our arrows and travel around to nearby landlords and towns to sell them. How did you fare?"

Most arrows made in towns were of iron. They were strong but expensive, and because they were made under the control of the craftsmen's guilds, they could be difficult to obtain with short notice for those without connections or with bad reputations in those towns. Without much else to do during the winter, the villagers seemed to be making ready to fill that demand with their handiwork.

Bone arrowheads were effective enough, especially when smeared with poison, and many archers even preferred them.

"Ah, yes, well, we have a favor to ask."

"Oh ho. What is it?"

"Actually, we need a map drawn for us."

Vino tilted his head at Lawrence's words. "Ah, er, a... map, you say? We don't much use them. What sort of map?"

"One of the area around the lake, including all the streams and rivers that flow out from it."

It seemed to take Vino a moment to understand what Lawrence was saying, and he was silent. When he finally did speak, it was in a voice that sounded hesitant and worried about being overheard. "You're not thinking of building a water mill, are you?" The simple villager's tone was nervously joking.

"We have no need of a water mill," said Lawrence without much enthusiasm. "It seems the way the water flows is important to the angel legend, and Sister Fran requires a map in order to properly guide us."

The explanation smelled fishy even to Lawrence, but Vino nodded, evidently believing it. "Ah, I see. Well, if that's all, it should be fine. The village has been told to cooperate with you, and it gives me an excuse for a break, so."

Regardless of how it was in larger towns, in small villages everyone pitched in on the same work. What was important was not who had done what, but whether all the work had been done or not.

Some found this burdensome and left for the towns, but many others found the camaraderie pleasant and reassuring. Different ways of looking at the same thing could give very different impressions.

"If you please, then," Lawrence replied.

"Well, shall we go see Mr. Mueller? His place is the only one with paper and ink."

"Yes, let's."

Vino nodded, giving his fellow arrow carvers a shout before beginning to walk.

It was not unlike scenes Lawrence had seen at many trading companies, and from time to time, he had thought that it would be nice to have comrades. This pang came to him less now, though—because he had them.

Perhaps Holo was thinking the same thing, because when their eyes met, they shared a secret smile as they followed behind Vino.

"Hey, Mr. Mueller!" called Vino.

Mueller happened to be leaving his house at just that moment. At his side, he had a stack of dried skins, and in one hand he held a large, fine knife. He was probably about to cut them up and make them into boots or the like. Despite Mueller's large body and hands, Lawrence got the feeling he was very skilled in their use.

"Ah, with our visitors. What is it?"

"I'm glad we caught you. We need to borrow paper and ink."

"Paper and ink?" Mueller was dubious, both because they were items not often used in the village and also because they were quite precious.

"They say they want a map. Of the lake area."

"A map?" Mueller looked back and forth between Vino and Lawrence and seemed to think something over. "Fine," he said eventually, then handed the skins and knife to Vino. "I'll draw it."

Holo looked down, the better to hide her smile beneath her hood. The moment he had heard Mueller's answer, Vino's face had fallen like a child whose toy has been taken away.

"You managed to sneak your way into getting meat yesterday without helping with the deer, didn't you?" said Mueller with a smug, older brotherish smile.

He was right, so Vino had no choice but nod in sad agreement.

"Off you go, then. These are for Lanan, Suk, and Sylhet. Ask Jana about the big one."

"Fine, fine!" grumbled Vino. Mueller grinned as he watched Vino go.

This was a good village, Lawrence thought. It was a shame to have such good cheer spoiled by rumors of a witch.

"I'll draw it inside. A map of the lake, you said?"

"More precisely, the area surrounding the lake, including all the rivers and streams that flow out of it."

Inside the house were hunting implements, knives and clasps for cleaning and tanning skins, workbenches, and sewn into the gaps between all these were necessities like a hearth and straw bed. It had a singular aura, totally unlike a town workshop or trading company. It was a sturdy place, fitting for a man who oversaw an entire village.

"Ah. That's a strange map to need." Unsurprisingly, his reaction was unlike Vino's. And his mind was quicker. "I'll bet Vino asked you if you were planning to build a water mill, eh?"

"He did indeed," Lawrence confessed, which Mueller grinned at.

"That fool. He came to me last night, pale faced, to tell me you'd asked about our hand grinding of grain. I gave him a smack and told him if you'd planned to build a mill, you wouldn't have gone out of your way to point out our ways." Like the landlord, he was skilled at using circumstances to keep the village safe.

Mueller pulled a workbench out and took an old sheaf of paper down from a shelf. "I hope this sort of paper will do."

The paper Mueller produced was old and discolored with tattered corners. It would not have been worth much in a town.

"For your trouble," said Lawrence, producing some salt, which Mueller nodded at, satisfied.

"Now then," said Mueller as he took out a cracked, old inkstone and a battered quill pen. "I don't think it will take much time, but feel free to sit anywhere."

Lawrence nodded and sat down on a chest. Holo teased a chicken that had wandered its way into the house.

"So how goes your quest for the legend?" Mueller asked. His gaze was directed at the top of the paper, and though his hand was quickly drawing the map, his attention was entirely on Lawrence.

Lawrence doubted this was merely small talk.

"She seems to have seized upon something. She was very insistent that I come and get this map."

"Ah, I see," said Mueller as he drew. He could probably endure any amount of waiting against an animal, but not, apparently, against human opponents. Soon he spoke again. "Was there a witch?"

This was what he was most concerned about. As the one most responsible for protecting the village, he was more worried about shapeless rumors than he was about water mills. When it came right down to it, they could stop the construction of a mill by chaining themselves to the trees. But banishing rumors of a witch was much more difficult.

His hand stopped, and even a child could tell his eyes were not focused on the paper. Lawrence watched Holo harassing the chicken, then smiled and spoke. "No, there wasn't."

The quiet scratching of the quill resumed. "I see," Mueller said and then continued the work in silence. Such a man was well suited to being a hunter. "This map would be different depending on the season."

As Mueller spoke, Holo and the chicken seemed to have come to an understanding, with the latter tucking its head under its wing and sleeping at her feet.

"She said all she needed was a map for the winter."

"I see. Well, this should do, then," said Mueller, standing. His joints popped as though to give evidence of the single-mindedness with which he had drawn the map. When he stretched, there was a final *pop* loud enough to wake the chicken from its slumber, much to Holo's delight. She smiled as she listened to the sound.

"You can take it once the ink's dry. Given the hour, you ought to be able to make it by sunset."

"Thank you very much."

"Not at all. I'm sure Vino said the same thing last night."

It didn't seem to Lawrence as though Mueller was trying to avoid work, but it was good manners to laugh at the joke anyway.

Mueller accepted the bag of salt. In a village so poor in currency, finding some of the basic necessities could be a constant struggle.

"My thanks," he said. "Now, I ought to go check in on Vino. You'd be surprised at how clumsy he can be. If he ruins those skins, I'll have to beat his backside with the tendons."

It was every bit the sort of thing a master craftsman would say, and Lawrence could not help but laugh. Holo was leaning against the doorway, and she smiled as she watched the village, listening to Lawrence and Mueller's conversation. If one were to wish for a certain day to continue forever, this would be a good day to pick.

But then, she raised her voice in a curious "Hmm?" as Mueller left the house and had just gotten to the space under the eaves.

"What is it?" Mueller stopped in his tracks and looked off into the distance.

His eyes were fixed on a spot outside the village, roughly where the elder had been sitting when he stopped Lawrence the previous day. It was a place on the road leading into the village that anyone entering would have to pass. Lawrence heard something that sounded like the footsteps of rats and soon realized it was the sound of horses at a great distance. He looked hard and saw what looked to be an old man riding at the head, trailed by many armed men who carried spears.

Mueller watched them disappear behind a house, and his face went instantly pale. "—!" He dropped the bag of tools he was carrying and started running as the riders came out from behind the house and headed for the center of the village. The startled chicken started to run, and Holo stood.

"What's the matter?"

"I have no idea. But they have spears."

"Mm."

If Lawrence's eyes did not deceive him, there were flags dangling from the spears. Mercenaries would be armed with poleaxes rather than spears. That left few possibilities.

He heard voices calling from the distance.

"We summon Mueller and the village elder!"

Holo turned to Lawrence, but Lawrence had nothing to say—because Mueller had run out of the house across from them and was coming toward them.

"The landlord's governor. He's finally come!" Mueller's forehead was sweaty and his face pale.

He ran into the house, opened a chest, and produced a bundle of parchment from a pot. It was probably the charter that most villages had.

Something that threatened the very existence of the village had happened.

"You two—" said Mueller, looking at the parchment. "There's a path to the lake from the rear of the village. It's well maintained, so you shouldn't have any problems. The governor doesn't know about you, so if you run you should arrive quickly. Tell the nun, will you please?" he said, rolling the map up on the workbench and thrusting it at Lawrence before bodily urging them toward the house's rear door. There was a finality to his movement that was more compelling than any physical strength.

Once they got to the rear door, Lawrence peered at Mueller's face.

"Tell her that the landlord's come to lay waste to any lands where the legend of the angel remains. And tell her to tell the Church."

"But—"

"Please! If you don't hurry, it will be too late!"

Lawrence gave Holo a quick look; she nodded.

Yet there was a hesitation in her eyes—she was surely considering whether or not they should simply run. After all, none of them had come to prove that Katerina was a witch, and the landlord should, if anything, be glad for the existence of Church figures who believed her to be a simple nun.

But then Mueller said a strange thing. "We'll repay this favor. For the sister's sake, as well." He looked back at the door, then again to Lawrence. "The forest and the lake will be destroyed."

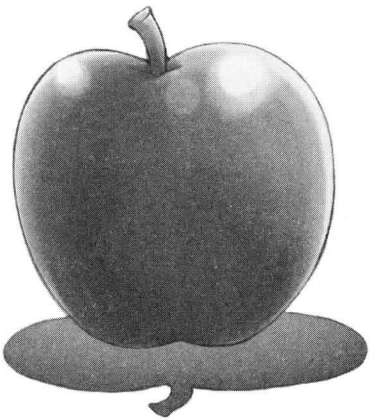
As though pushed away by the force of those words, Lawrence and Holo went out the rear door and left the house. Immediately thereafter, the governor's soldiers seemed to reach Mueller's house, calling out for him in loud voices.

Lawrence hesitated but eventually took Holo's hand and ran.

The forest and the lake would be destroyed?

The question burned inside him as he ran.

CHAPTER FIVE



They soon found the path from the back of the village into the forest.

It was narrow, just wide enough to accommodate hunters carrying felled deer. Still, the snow was packed hard with footsteps and brushed free from sticks and branches, so it was well traveled and running was easy.

Lawrence and Holo ran for all they were worth through the trees in the forest.

"What was all that about?"

"No idea. He said that was the governor. Seems like it'll be... trouble for the village." Lawrence took a break in the middle of his sentence to jump over a tree root. Lawrence lifted the hem of Holo's robe to do likewise, which she managed quite lightly.

"He said the forest and lake would be destroyed."

"He did," said Lawrence, and just then he thought of something.

The governor and his troops had descended on the village, sending the village's representative, Mueller, into a panic. And if the forest and the lake were going to be destroyed, that suggested but one thing.

But he said nothing about it to Holo—not for any particular

reason, but simply because his breath was too ragged for him to speak.

Holo started to lag, and Lawrence took her hand as they ascended a gentle hill.

"I should've taken... my true form," said Holo, though whether she was joking or not was unclear. Just then, the path made a sudden left turn and brightened. Following the line of sight, they could see the lake. They kept going that way for a time, soon reaching a side path that descended to the lake. Down the slope they slid.

There were footprints—perhaps Col's and Fran's—by the lake, but they seemed to run in two directions, both coming and going.

Lawrence looked around, and there were two figures at the entrance to the path that led to the cottage by the waterfall. They seemed to be watching something and were not moving. Lawrence waved his hand and was about to call out to them, but then Holo stopped him.

"Ngh! Hey—what's wrong?"

"Don't raise your voice," said Holo quietly. For a moment he wondered if she was making some kind of joke, but there was nothing funny about her expression.

Lawrence directed his gaze back at Fran and Col, and then he realized they were not looking at anything, much less being affectionate with each other.

They were stock-still. As though they were holding their breath.

"There's probably someone at the bottom of the hill."

"...If that's so, shouldn't they hide?"

"Fool. In this kind of place, even if they're in plain sight they won't be spotted, so long as they don't move. But even behind the trees, if we move, we'll be spotted."

Holo was a wolf, a hunter of the forest, so if she said so, it was true.

Now that she had told him, Lawrence found that when he looked more closely he could see Fran's and Col's bodies frozen in place, with Col in a characteristically awkward, panicked pose.

Fran had done exactly the right thing.

But what Lawrence wanted to know was why she was familiar with the tactics for such rough circumstances when even he had been unfamiliar with them?

"Hmph." Holo sniffed, probably thinking the same thing.

After a while, Fran's pose relaxed, and she faced Lawrence and Holo, beckoning them over. Despite the good distance between them, she seemed to have recognized them.

Lawrence gave the displeased Holo a nudge from behind, and the two of them ran in Fran's direction.

"What happened?" Lawrence asked Fran.

Col's anxiety seemed to evaporate when he recognized Lawrence and Holo, and he collapsed to the ground in relief.

"Soldiers came to the cottage. And you?"

"The same. Soldiers at the village. Apparently the landlord has come in force. They say the forest and lake will be destroyed."

Lawrence, for his part, could not understand what the landlord was trying to accomplish. But Fran had a sense of the village's circumstances before they came here. Hearing what Lawrence had to say, she seemed to immediately understand the direction things were taking. She gazed at the river with a troubled expression that quickly turned to anger, as though it was being painted that way.

"I'm impressed with their lack of scruples."

"You mean—" Lawrence said, but before he could even finish the question, Fran continued.

"They've come here to make Katerina no more."

In that instant, Lawrence understood their goal.

Katerina was already dead, so Fran's words took on a more literal meaning.

"I suppose you could say we're in an age of money, where things like Church or pagan no longer matter." It was a good line. Fran chuckled blackly through her anger at the joke and then sighed. "I'd come so far... and *now* the landlord decides to act? I was so close... so, so close...," she said, frustrated, the sound of her clenching fists audible even beneath her robe.

Having been cast about between the Church and the pagans, the landlord had chosen a third option. Seeing the visible decline of Church power, he had surely grown sick of being used by them. He would erase every trace of Katerina, distancing himself from religious conflicts and never bothering to clear her name.

Moreover, he would construct a water mill, and in conjunction with a new northern campaign incited by the Debau Company, he would use the mill's power to attract craftsmen and workers—for in the face of money, what could the Church or the pagans say?

"Did you get the map?" Fran looked up, almost glaring at Lawrence.

"I did... but please, wait a moment."

Fran started to step forward, but Lawrence stopped her, giving her a look that was every bit as serious as the one she wore.

"Please calm down. If the landlord has decided to destroy all traces of Katerina, then our presence is an obstacle. Arguing with him will be impossible, and he's hardly likely to let you continue to investigate the legend of the angel."

Fran's face contorted at Lawrence's words. The girl was no fool. Even in anger, she was just as clever as she had always been.

"I know the legend was right in front of you. And I know you didn't come here on some whim. But it's too dangerous.

"We must flee."

When Lawrence said the words, Fran flinched as though

physically struck by them, taking one step back, then another. He could understand Col hurrying to her side to support her. Had he failed to do so, she would have fallen to the ground.

"...No...I can't...I was so close..."

It was so recently that she had been delighted, unable to contain her excitement as she jumped into the cottage. And now her despair was proportional to her anticipation, too heavy to bear.

Holo's face was pained, and she said nothing.

If they were going to run, they would have to do so now, while the soldiers had briefly retreated.

"I'm sorry, but...," Lawrence started, and he tried to take Fran's hand. But then—

"Lud Kieman told me about you."

Lawrence was at a loss for words, partially because he did not understand what she meant. But it was not because suddenly hearing Kieman's name felt like she had correctly guessed something that should have been a secret. If she was going to partner with Lawrence and his companions, a simple investigation would have led her to Kerube, where it was reasonable to imagine she would soon have found Kieman.

What gave Lawrence pause was a more rational premonition entirely. Or else his merchant's instincts had come to a different conclusion on their own, quite separately from reason or logic.

In that instant, Lawrence understood what Fran was trying to say.

"He said you fear no god, you seize opportunities for profit, and you use your connections with skill." Fran wiped her tears and tried without success to smile a bold smile. Her failure to do so only made her seem more desperate.

Lawrence had to ask, praying he had guessed wrong.

"What is it you would have me do?"

"Please tell them that Katerina Lucci is a saint."

Lawrence could understand why Col and Holo would look so dubious.

Religious strategies of any sort were becoming impossible. So why would she fixate on that? Surely both Col and Holo were wondering as much—but not Lawrence.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. There was a huge difference between a respected nun and a saint. Both in how they were treated and what that was worth.

"That can't be..."

"Her candidacy for canonization has been submitted. They hid their identities in Lenos, but she had many among the nobility that supported her. The petition for her canonization to the pontiff has been submitted and even now is on the desk of the cardinalate. What do you think?"

When she finished speaking, Fran closed her mouth, as though her mind was entirely made up. And it was true—what she said carried weight.

Fran, the dauntless, lonely silversmith. She had made an irritatingly pragmatic decision in perfect keeping with her reputation.

Lawrence swallowed. "When Sister Katerina becomes Saint Katerina, everything in that cottage, including her body, will become holy relics."

At the words *holy relics*, Col raised his voice in a surprised "Ah!"

That seemed to be the signal for Fran to finally succeed at smiling a thin, faint smile. "When the landlord learns how much holy relics can be worth, he'll give up on the water mill. If you doubt me, let's go back to the cottage and look at her diary. It's filled with the names and details of lords from many different lands. Even the fact that the cottage has been left alone is probably because the canonization proceedings were stalled."

It was the sort of thing that Lawrence had only ever heard in rumors.

When someone was canonized as a saint, anything connected to their person could for whatever reason be sold for huge amounts of money. If they were reputed to have performed miracles, then pilgrims would come, and not just from the Church, but also the surrounding region. Noblemen would sometimes band together in order to get clergy from their area canonized, but the application required an extravagant amount of money.

From the perspective of the nobility, it was a large gamble involving their happiness in the afterlife against their wealth while they still lived.

It was said that many had gone bankrupt trying to accomplish it, and yet it kept being tried because the potential gains were enormous.

Katerina Lucci was destined to be dragged into someone's scheme.

"So you want me to sell... a saint?"

"I have heard that you're experienced in business." She smiled the same smile she had used at Hugues's shop when she claimed a map of the north would cost him fifty *lumione*. But this time, he could not let it go.

Lawrence delivered his reply. "This is madness. There is no way a merchant like me can handle holy relics. Even if I passed myself off as one, it would last but a moment. With the narwhal in Kerube, it was Kieman who handled the bulk of the exchange, along with another merchant who was former nobility. And in Winfiel, I was on the edges of a deal involving a holy relic, but to be blunt, it wasn't on a scale that involved me."

Money was not something that just accumulated. Its quality and nature could change from one moment to another. From an amount that could purchase a good to an amount that could purchase a person's heart to one that could change a person's destiny.

A holy relic was in that same company.

But Fran never took her gaze from Lawrence, and standing her ground, she played her final trump card. "In exchange, I'll draw you a map of the northlands. Right away, if you like."

A moment passed.

"...What?" he replied out of simple shock.

It was as though she felt it was entirely fair to offer a simple map in return for him fabricating a saint and undertaking the dangerous business of dealing in holy relics constructed from lies.

Fran looked at him evenly.

"Do you truly believe that's a fair trade?" Lawrence could not help asking.

In that moment, Fran's face was somehow charming. Her eyes were wide as she looked at him, as though she might reply at any moment, "I do indeed!"

But unlike when Lawrence had told her about the villagers who had come to the cottage, something else poured into her expression, replacing her fading surprise.

That brown skin and those black eyes.

He would not have objected to someone calling her a sorceress. Fran spoke in a flat, low tone. "Are you saying you won't risk danger to get your map of the northlands?"

Lawrence glanced over at Holo.

Holo was expressionless, staring at Fran, while Col was obviously distraught.

If it had only been about the danger, then of course he could have taken the risk. But to take Katerina, who had already endured being called a witch, and to now claim she was a saint and sell her off to some landlord was flatly impossible.

After doing such a thing, how could Lawrence then take Holo's hand with a clean conscience?

"To falsely approach the landlord and then negotiate with him on the pretenses of selling a saint? I cannot do it."

"I see," said Fran and began to walk away.

Lawrence did not move. So smooth was her motion that after she passed by Lawrence, she held in her hand the map that he had previously tucked near his breast.

"Where are you going?" He knew it was a stupid question, but could not help asking.

Fran stopped as though mulling something over, then came slowly walking back. "You got Hugues to talk to you, so I thought you were made of sterner stuff."

He thought back to how Hugues had endured Fran's haughty treatment. His first, biggest priority was to have Fran create paintings of his homeland. And it was true, Lawrence had convinced Hugues to talk.

Fran continued. "I thought you were the same as me. But I was wrong."

"What do you—" *Mean*, Lawrence was going to finish, but he did not have the chance.

"Do you think you're going to get a map of the north with only that much resolve?"

"—!"

Lawrence felt as though he had been stabbed through the heart. Fran started walking again.

His feet refused to move; they felt sewn in place. He could not even think. He felt as though they had all been playing some kind of prank, and she had just dumped freezing water on them.

Why not just say it, plain and simple: To what lengths was he willing to go to find a map of the northlands? His resolve was insignificant.

He wanted to travel with Holo. It was a lukewarm promise they had made to each other, not to give up. Chasing after the wolf bones and tracking down a map of the northlands, these were not meaningless things. Taken individually, they could not be overlooked.

But as to what sort of foundation they made when taken as a whole—he understood that all too well. It was the simple, childish wish to simply stay with Holo. And only a very meager tower could be built upon such a foundation.

Lawrence knew that, but to have it so clearly pointed out made him feel deeply wretched.

He was standing there, nailed to the ground, when Holo took his hand. "She certainly hit you hard."

He looked at her, and her eyes seemed almost relieved, like a girl whose mischief had been uncovered.

"But do you suppose she truly plans to sell that dried-out, old thing?"

Impossible, Lawrence immediately thought.

In which case, the course of events was obvious. Holo's eyes said as much as they admonished Lawrence.

Holo's righteous anger had been roused before, to say nothing of when it was for the sake of helpless villagers.

But he was not thinking to use Katerina for their own aims after she had died following a lifetime of abuse at the hands of the villagers and the landlord.

So many regrets remained. And yet he could not approve Fran's proposal. In the worst-case scenario, he could end up killed to keep things quiet.

"We should run," said Lawrence, and Holo nodded.

It was Col who raised his voice, having listened carefully to the conversation. "We're going to leave Fran behind?"

Lawrence and Holo exchanged a look. There was no argument about Fran's importance.

"Once we've escaped to a safer place, we can ask Holo or even Hugues for help. We'll make sure she's safe. There are many people who need Miss Fran, after all."

No one was going to let her die pointlessly.

But Col seemed on the verge of tears. "No, I mean... are you giving up on the legend of the angel that Miss Fran was chasing?"

Lawrence was at a loss at how to honestly reply. The legend of the angel had been Fran's own reason for coming and had nothing to do with Lawrence and his companions. But then he soon corrected himself.

Had Col not heard Fran's goal? Had she not confided in him the reason why she was so determined to claim Katerina's sainthood and deceive the landlord?

Lawrence was just about to explain how unreasonable it would be to take the risk of chasing the legend now—but bit the words back because of a book.

Col, nearly crying now, thrust a single volume at him. "I know I forced myself off on you and Miss Holo, Mr. Lawrence, but I just can't abandon Miss Fran like this," he said, and handing the book to Lawrence, he shouldered his pack and set off after her.

Lawrence never even had a chance to say anything.

Col was a kind, gentle boy. If Fran's quest was a sincerely felt one, then once he heard her reason, he could not help but be moved by it, Lawrence assumed.

But his assumption was soon scattered to the wind.

The book Col had handed Lawrence—from the writing on its cover, he could tell that it was a book of scripture.

Lawrence's face stiffened, but not because he had just had a holy book shoved at him. It was because the cover of the book was discolored by large bloodstains.

"What's that?" Holo asked, bringing Lawrence back to his senses.

"Seems to be a book of scriptures..." Lawrence gently opened the book. The pages' edges were torn here and there, and some were stuck together with blood. It didn't seem like overstatement to say it had been through the hell of war.



Then Lawrence noticed there were several folded pieces of paper stuck between the pages of the book. He opened them and saw the terse notes there, written in needle-sharp handwriting.

"Dear Kira... vai... en... Kirjavainen Mercenary Troop?"

There, on a piece of paper between the pages of a bloodstained scripture book, was written the name of a mercenary band. Lawrence brushed the soot away and looked more closely, reading the writing there. Next to the band's name, there was another name, the addressee of the letter.

"Fran... Vonely."

It had come from the pack Col had carried in Fran's place, so it was not surprising he had been carrying something that was addressed to her. Lawrence found himself murmuring her name, because in front of it was also written a title.

"Troop Chaplain, Fran Vonely."

The moment he saw those words, Lawrence felt a great shock, as though he had been struck on the head with an iron rod. He did not even hear Holo trying to get his attention as he paged through the letter.

The characters were blurred in places and smeared with blood, soot, and grime, sometimes too badly to be read. But Lawrence could tell that it had been written by someone in the Kirjavainen mercenary troop—and by someone who was far away from Fran. At the top of the second page, the scribe had written, "May they reach your prayers from this far-off land," followed by a simple list of facts, all in a peculiar hand.

"Decurion Martin Ghurkas killed in the battle of Lydion."

"Betrayed on the Lavan plains. Pursued by the soldiers of Marquis Lizzo. Cursed by God. Lienne the sutler died that night of injuries. He went in his sleep and left no will."

"Heimann Rosso, the centurion who'd been sheltered by the

count, was betrayed and arrested. He passed in the dungeon in fine form and was always worried about you."

And then, the last piece of paper.

"In the town of Miligua in the Nacculi diocese, in the month of Saint Rafenne, executed by hanging. A last message for you was 'I'll see the angel before you...'"

The last page was badly crumpled, and there was more written, but it was so thoroughly blurred that it was not legible.

Lawrence stood there silently, and when he finally spoke, it was a simple, low "Ah" of understanding.

Young but trusted by nobility. Used to hard physical labor. Bold and fearless as a mountain bandit. And for all that, still graceful and refined.

Kieman had said she was a silversmith born on the battlefield. Fran herself had told Hugues she had been a slave—and those two meanings now connected.

In her mercenary band, as arrows and swords rained down upon them, to protect her comrades-in-arms, Fran had raised the shield of faith against the fear and despair of death.

Given all that, Fran's reason for seeking out the legend of the angel must have naturally changed. The last piece of paper was wrinkled, the writing blurred—and it pointed to one thing.

The dear friend of whom Fran had spoken had been the centurion that was hung.

He had only to recall the legend of the angel. The doors to the heavens were flung open, and the angel ascended.

He had been looking for a special meaning in those words, but all that was needed were the words themselves.

There were countless stories of the misery that was life in the latter days of a mercenary troop. For Fran to have lived through it meant she passed through that hell. The words "from this far-off land" betrayed that much.

And it was just as Hugues had said. Those with teeth and claws are the first to die.

The troop chaplain could do nothing but pray. And since prayers did nothing to stop a sword, they were spared participation in battle.

And so Fran had lived.

"Come, you."

Holo's words brought Lawrence out of his reverie, but she said nothing more.

"Sorry."

She could probably guess what he was going to say next just by his expression. A wind blew from downriver, skimming along the surface of the waning flow, through the space between Lawrence and Holo and up into the forest, taking some snow with it as it went.

"Can we not help her?" Lawrence said simply.

Instead of replying, Holo held out her hand as if asking for the scripture book.

"So?" she said, looking up after she finished reading the letters and the scriptures.

She might not have worked out the details, but she probably understood the larger plan. After all, Col had expressed his own opinion for once and had gone chasing after Fran. That alone was not something they could ignore.

"I know all I've got is my cheap sympathy."

"So why, then?"

Lawrence smiled in response, but not because he was trying to fake it. What he had to say was simply embarrassing.

Holo glared at him dubiously and grabbed his ear. But Lawrence's smile remained. His thoughts were just that foolish.

"I was just thinking that it would be nice if the world were a gentler place."

Holo did not let him go.

Lawrence's eyes remained on her.

"I was thinking how lovely it would be if things would go just a little more smoothly. How nice it would be to get past reality and common sense. Something like that."

Fran's mercenary troop had been unable to avoid reality. Fran had lived on, and Lawrence could not imagine that she truly believed she could find the miracle that had so eluded her comrades.

A water mill would be constructed, and if her luck was bad, Fran would be killed. And even if things did not go that way, comparing those who had died to those who had lived still showed the truth of the world. Any child who had been beaten for misbehaving knew that much.

But Katerina had contented herself with being called a witch, with being reviled, abiding in that cottage with nothing but her faith, all to glimpse a legend that common sense dictated she would surely not see.

She concerned herself with neither cheap sympathy nor false miracles.

The world had its kinder moments. That was what she had believed.

"You truly are a fool." Holo made a baffled face and sighed a deep sigh. She let go of his ear as though she could no longer stand to go along with such a fool. But with her other hand, she curled her little finger around Lawrence's ring finger. "You know the world really isn't that happy a place?"

Holo was a wisewolf. She could see right through the silly notions of her companion.

"I know. Still—"

"Still, what?"

If he answered wrongly, she might leave him right then and there—or so he would have thought until quite recently.

Lawrence took Holo's hand and drew her close. "Don't you want to help this stubborn girl, with her painful past and a goal she can't give up?"

Holo bared her fangs. They were very white. "If you fail, I won't forgive you."

"Of course," Lawrence said, lightly bumping Holo's forehead with his own. "Of course," he said again.

"But what exactly do you plan to do?" Holo finally gave in and asked as they made their way back to the cottage.

"Nothing too difficult. I'm just going to refer to Katerina as a saint."

"...So you'll sell her?"

"No. Not at all—all I have to say is that we've been employed for the service of confirming her application for canonization."

That implied nothing less than that the powerful figures responsible for canonization decisions were paying attention to this region. If Lawrence and his companions met with an unnatural accident or if mysterious action was taken against the villagers, the landlord would immediately find himself in serious trouble.

"But even the most foolish lord would investigate the matter, especially if he's a coward. Even if she is being considered for canonization, he'll soon discover that we've nothing to do with that. So what would that possibly...?" Holo said but trailed off as she realized.

Her displeased expression was just as Lawrence predicted.

"I did say I needed your help, didn't I?"

"...I thought you meant my knowledge," grumbled Holo, her lips twisted in a sneer. But she said nothing further.

"In the legend of the angel, it's said that there was the howl of a great beast. If you'll lend your help, it'll be simple to put on a show that will prove Katerina's sainthood beyond any doubt."

"Mm."

"The truth is that Katerina's canonization proceedings have stalled. So long as the Church doesn't publicly confirm her sainthood, there will be no financial incentives in the form of valuable holy relics. And if there's nothing of value, how could I sell it?"

"A rather makeshift plan, if you ask me," Holo interjected, unamused.

"You could at least call it 'cunning.'"

Holo sighed, as though to say they were one and the same.

"So all we need to do is tell the landlord as much. As money and faith are intertwined, if rumors start to spread, it won't do him any good, we'll say."

For a landlord trapped between the Church and the pagans, this would constitute a strong argument indeed. He ought to stay as quiet as a well-trained hound.

Of course, there was no telling whether they would be able to hold the landlord off for long. But Lawrence was sure this would buy them enough time.

Enough for Fran to be able to give up on the angel legend, anyway.

"Well, I suppose it's better than turning tail and running away," said Holo, tossing another piece of firewood onto the cottage's hearth.

Katerina Lucci was one step away from being publicly declared a saint by the Church.

Her diary was less a diary than it was a simple record of her daily activities. But that was more than enough to come to

understand the person Katerina had been and the circumstances in which she had lived.

She had been consulted by an archbishop whose name was known even to Lawrence, as well as a noblewoman and a wealthy merchant. She spent her days replying to such correspondence, as well as studying topics of concern to the Church and translating the scriptures and copying important documents.

Those activities alone were evidence of a serene and pious life, but in her diary, Katerina had also recorded some of her innermost thoughts.

She had turned over her translation of the scriptures to a bishop upon receiving his request to do so, but when the lending period had ended, he had refused to return it. A book merchant had held her manuscript against her will in exchange for money. The Church council had deemed theology not a subject suitable for women to consider, and she had been forced to write under a false name.

But the greatest revelations were the letters from the many powerful figures who had heard of her reputation and written her for advice. Though the archbishop's letter was phrased in all sorts of complicated religious language, the ridiculous gist was that he was constantly being invited to this or that nobleman's banquet and eating to excess, and he wanted to know what he should do.

The noblewoman wrote to complain at nauseating length about her quarrels with her husband.

The wealthy merchant very directly posed the question of exactly how much he would need to give to the poor in order to assure his own entrance into heaven.

Katerina replied seriously and conscientiously to every letter she received, and some of her drafts remained. However, in between her replies to these absurd questions were written short

sentences, apparently to herself. *Are these trials God has sent to test me?* she wondered. They wrung distress from this nun, who was only trying to deepen her faith.

It seemed that the process for canonization had taken place entirely outside of Katerina's participation. She had written many times attempting to decline, but the letters that came back only showed growing support and that sainthood was close.

As Lawrence committed to memory the names and doings of the many powerful people in the letters, he felt progressively worse and worse.

It was written in the diary that a representative of the village had come to her one day and, having explained the circumstances to her, asked for permission to begin calling her a witch.

Katerina had sympathized with the villagers and had agreed, as long as she would be the only one to suffer the consequences. Just as Fran had said, she had lamented the weakness of humans, writing in a tangled and distraught hand.

And then suddenly, the diary became much more diary-like. She wrote of the changing seasons, of her dogs, and later their puppies. When she had to hunt birds, she asked God's forgiveness for doing so. So her diary went.

Meanwhile, letters from nobles continued to come, but no evidence remained of her replies. She had even ceased to write about the condition of the villagers.

Lawrence wondered if she had freed herself of their burdens, realizing that her own faith could not change them, nor could it change the world.

Toward the end, her diary seemed filled with pleasant, joyful things. Lawrence slowly closed it. It was beginning to grow dim outside, and the sun would soon set.

He added a log to the hearth and went past the skin partition into the back room. Holo wanted to check the bookshelves for

anything else that might be of use, but upon reaching the room, Holo opened a wooden window there and gazed out of it.

Katerina seemed to be sitting in the chair, and for a moment it seemed that she and Holo were looking out the window together.

"I can see the falls," Holo murmured. "'Tis a good view."

Drawn over by her words, Lawrence stood behind Holo and looked out the window. He could indeed see the waterfall past the trees. Looking opposite the waterfall, there was a small space that seemed to have been plucked free of underbrush and was covered in a layer of snow.

It wasn't hard to imagine it being a flower garden, perhaps.

"She might have just sat down here and closed her eyes for an afternoon nap," said Holo, and she poked Katerina's head very lightly.

One might reasonably conclude from her diary that she had indeed had such a lovely last moment. Lawrence smiled a sad smile, and Holo put her hand to the window. "The wind's gotten cold," she said and closed it tight.

Holo wasn't usually the type to close a window. Perhaps she was scared of continuing their conversation here.

Any conversation carried out in the presence of a body, no matter how happy the memories it might be regarding, would always end up sadly—all the more when the person in question, who had been called a nun, a saint, and both in life and death, was at the mercy of the whims of others.

Once she had closed the window, Holo returned to the room with the hearth. Lawrence followed, but could not help looking back over his shoulder once.

They might call the villagers or the landlord presumptuous, but he, too, was using Katerina's sainthood for his own purposes. But he decided not to think about it and followed after Holo.

A merchant chased profit and only profit. He held that indulgence, that excuse in his heart.

Later, Fran and Col returned. Fran was unable to hide her surprise at finding Lawrence still in the cottage. She gasped a little at seeing the bloodstained book of scripture in Lawrence's hand.

Fran looked at Col and then back to Lawrence.

In his hand was her past and the present that continued from that past.

Fran's gaze dropped to the floor.

A merchant had to pursue profit at all times.

"You'll be drawing that map for us, then." Lawrence felt he could hear the sound of her fists clenching the fabric of her robe. "We have our own convictions, too, after all."

Fran nodded, still looking down. A droplet of water fell to the floor. "...I understand. I promise." She wiped the corner of her eyes and then looked up. "Thank you."

Lawrence smiled, accepting Fran's thanks, but his gaze was elsewhere.

The embers in the hearth collapsed, sending up a puff of sparks.

Lawrence's eyes were directed outside the cottage. "It's still a bit early for thank-yous."

Fran, having been a chaplain, seemed to understand what he meant. She nodded again and asked him the question directly. "What do you plan to do?"

"As before, you're a silversmith dispatched by the bishop, that should be fine. But as another goal, I'd like to add that we're here to confirm particulars regarding the canonization."

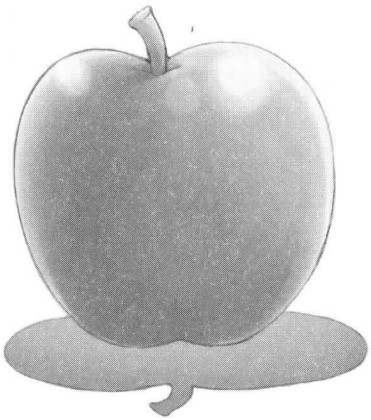
Fran seemed confused for a moment, but she was a clever girl. She soon realized Lawrence's aim and slowly nodded.

"I've no intention of selling Katerina off. Instead, I'll state that her canonization is ongoing, so that the landlord won't give us any trouble."

Fran nodded again and spoke more clearly this time. "Understood." The sound of distant hoofbeats could be heard. Fran wiped her tears again, holding close the bloodstained scripture book she had taken from Lawrence. "Let us go, then."

When she looked up, her face was firm and undaunted, the words she spoke worthy of the girl who had lived on the battlefield.

CHAPTER SIX



Consider the term *high horse.*

The old knight was on a literal high horse as he looked down at Lawrence, backlit by torches.

"You're the one they say came from Ruvinheigen?"

Had they decided to run, without Holo's aid they would probably have been caught by these knights somewhere on the road to town. Behind the old knight was a contingent of soldiers mostly comprised of farmers from the area wearing hastily thrown-on leather armor. It would not have been a good idea to attempt to escape into the night with them in pursuit.

From that perspective, waiting in the cottage was the right choice. But it was still unclear whether things would go well or not.

Just as they had discussed, Holo and Col were still in the cottage, with only Lawrence and Fran venturing out.

"That's right," Lawrence replied, and the old knight turned to his soldiers and gestured with his chin.

He had introduced himself as the landlord appointed governor, so Lawrence thought he might produce a document proving as much.

But instead what was thrust at Lawrence was the point of a spear.

"You saw nothing and heard nothing here. Or else you never came at all." If they did not understand his meaning, they did not value their own lives, he seemed to imply.

But if he had planned to kill them, he would not have bothered with a conversation. Lawrence calmly looked up at the governor.

"What's your answer?" The governor's tone did not waver. If they did as ordered, perhaps they would be allowed to leave. And whatever Lawrence and company might tell the Church after that, it would be after the fact. It would not be hard to keep their heads in the sand.

But if they defied the order...

They were in a forest. No one would answer their cries for help.

It did not take a clever merchant to arrive at the obvious course of action.

And yet this is how Lawrence answered.

"We have been sent by the bishop in order to render the legend of the angel in silverwork."

The governor's right eyelid twitched. "And you may tell them you failed in your goal. Ruvinheigen is very far from here. No one will doubt you."

"Yes, that is quite true."

The high-handed governor seemed visibly relieved, even from the ground. Kings and emperors who had built their nations had often themselves been the lords of small, meager lands. They had risen through the ranks, coming to control the other lords in their area through their sheer capacity as people.

If so, this acting was probably the most this governor was capable of.

"However, that was not our only purpose."

Lawrence could hear the governor draw a sharp breath.

"Do you know who the saint that lies in the cottage behind me is?"

"Saint...?" the governor replied dubiously.

Lawrence continued, "Her name is Katerina Lucci. She earned the trust of many a noble, and her application for canonization has been submitted to the pontiff in the far south. She is a genuine and true saint."

"..."

Such a mixture of surprise and doubt would render anyone expressionless.

The governor's eyes regarded him, full of worry.

"We've been sent to investigate as part of the canonization process. After all, she was a woman who hated appearing in front of others. For a long time her whereabouts were unknown, but she was finally located, so..."

If this lie was true, nothing would come of silencing Lawrence and his companions now. If the governor or the landlord harmed them, they would be harming their future selves as well.

"However, the honored sister has passed peacefully away. There are many who without a title would treat even God as a cur, a beast, but I know the landlord here understands the way of things. I shall be sure to make note of that in my report. And incidentally..." Lawrence looked the governor evenly in the eyes. "I presume that you will need to consult with your honored lord?"

As though struck by a magic spell that caused time to begin moving again, the governor returned to his senses. He wiped sweat from his brow. His mouth twitched, probably out of his efforts to maintain his facade of authority.

But before words of anger could leave his mouth, a voice sounded from behind him.

"It certainly seems that way."

The old knight looked back over his shoulder as though pulled.

In the center of the hastily assembled troop of farmers turned soldiers were a few proper fighters, and from among them emerged a single man.

He was slender and middle-aged, to whom a high, shrill voice would seem appropriate.

Yet he did have an undeniable aura of command, and it seemed entirely fitting for the governor to dismount from his horse and come to his master's side, though the lord dismissed him.

He approached Lawrence alone, perhaps disliking being petitioned indirectly.

"I am Kirchner Linguid."

Lawrence had not expected the man to introduce himself. Apparently he had no intention of immediately calling Lawrence's claims into question.

Lawrence started to take a knee in a bow, but Linguid stopped him with a hand.

"I am Kraft Lawrence of the Rowen Trade Guild," he said, standing.

"Mm." Linguid nodded, and after heaving a heavy sigh, he continued, "I'll put it to you straight, then. Do you have any proof to support your claims?"

For a lord to dismount and say such a thing immediately proved his hesitation. All the more so given the tough words spoken with a tough attitude.

Lawrence realized that he was a small player in a tight position, just trying to stay alive.

"What might I bring forth as evidence?" Lawrence asked, and for a moment, Linguid was at a loss for words.

He opened his mouth as though angry, either because he thought he was being mocked or simply because of what Lawrence had asked.

"I have heard nothing of this supposed canonization. Some-

thing so important should certainly have reached my ears. So speak. Have you proof?"

When a timid man's face went red from anger, you could be certain the rage in his heart had been sparked.

But there was no need to further wound his pride, so Lawrence quickly replied, "This involves many people in various positions. Someone like me isn't provided material proof. But if I might propose an alternative, I could list some of the names of the nobles who've charged me with this duty."

The world of the nobility was a small one, and Lawrence had heard that they all had a good understanding of who was connected to whom. Especially in a region with both Church and pagan inhabitants, where continued existence could only be ensured by constant groveling, Linguid would be well aware of such things.

Lawrence cleared his throat, opened Katerina's diary in his mind's eye, and spoke.

"Baron Lans of Rien. Sir Marth of Dorenne. Marquis Ivendott of Singhilt. Archbishop Corselio of the Lamann Archdiocese."

Lawrence paused for a moment and watched Linguid's reaction. He seemed to recognize some of the names and stood there mutely. Lawrence continued.

"There's Sirs D'une and Maraffe, and Countess Roez from the Linz duchy. And in Ploania..."

Lawrence was preparing to continue, but Linguid stopped him with a hand.

His face was pale with fright.

Lawrence had only listed the names located in the north of Ploania. As someone who had had to deal with the religious conflicts in the area, they would have been names Linguid was familiar with.

And there was one more important thing.

All these nobles had been involved in an important affair regarding his own lands, and yet he had known nothing. It suggested the possibility that he was seen as a pagan power, an enemy of the Church.

If this Lawrence truly had come to confirm a canonization, then doubting the man's word was too dangerous for someone in Linguid's position to risk. It was all he could do to go along with it.

"F-fine, I understand. So... what must I do?"

It would have been a lie to say Lawrence did not feel some pity for the terrified lord, but past that he felt only anger. Merchants were said to be the least scrupulous people in the world, but even as a merchant he found Linguid pathetic.

Lawrence had hoped a landlord would have had a bit more pride, but he did not let the thought show on his face. He merely smiled. "Please, do not worry. You weren't consulted regarding the canonization simply because this region is a complicated one. I understand that you've had trouble governing it."

Linguid was probably twice Lawrence's age, but he nodded like a child. Perhaps he had been born in the wrong place.

"But as you can see, the cottage has been beautifully kept. It's clear to me that you, my lord, are a faithful and pious man. I am sure that when they hear of this, those responsible for managing this matter will be relieved to hear it."

"Th-that's right. I imagine so." He smiled a simpering smile.

Next to Lawrence, Fran made no reaction, either because she simply had that much self-control or else she had seen enough bloodshed on the battlefield and would invite no more.

"But this process being what it is, it must proceed in secret. Can I have your word that you will keep this quiet while the canonization proceeds?"

"...But that's..."

"There are many, many obstacles," said Lawrence, which Linguid gulped at and nodded.

The plan had succeeded.

Once Holo emerged to make doubly sure, none of these men would even think of approaching the forest or the lake.

Lawrence was about to speak the words he had agreed upon with Holo ahead of time. But just then—

"That's her!" called out a voice at this most inopportune moment.

Linguid whirled around, and Lawrence, too, searched for the source of the voice.

What met his gaze was a single soldier carrying a spear. He wore a battered iron helmet and breastplate and was obviously an experienced fighter.

The man took three steps forward. "That's her! That's her!" he said.

Lawrence thought he heard Fran hold her breath.

"What do you mean, 'That's her?' "

"That's her, boss!"

Regardless of how weak a ruler Linguid was, no retainer would dare call him "boss." This man had to be a paid mercenary.

He spat on the snow as he looked at them with dubious eyes. Or more accurately, he looked at Fran.

"It's just as the villagers said!"

"The villagers?" said Linguid, looking doubtfully back at Lawrence and Fran. His eyes seemed to apologize for the rudeness of his hireling, but Lawrence made a reassuring gesture.

"Aye, the villagers were talking about a dark-skinned silversmith, and that's got to be her!"

It seemed that Linguid went stiff, but that was probably a mistake. Because it was Lawrence who froze, and in doing so, his vision shook.

"T-tell me, then! What do you know?"

At Linguid's words the man spat again and smiled a thin smile. "I know there's nothing so absurd as the idea that these two are from the Church."

Linguid turned back to Lawrence and Fran, openly looking at one, then the other. He was not trying to gauge their mood, but rather their reactions.

"Don't let 'em lie to you, boss! That tanned silversmith is named Fran Vonely, the black priestess of the Scarlet Hawk mercenary band!"

The man advanced without hesitation. He pointed the iron-tipped, battle-worn spear directly at Fran. "She was the chaplain of the Kirjavainen mercenary troop, which made a bit of a name for itself in Ploania. My own band's got them to thank for quite a bit. They got my friend of twenty years in Kardin Gorge."

Linguid practically jumped back from Lawrence.

If the world of the nobility was a small one, the world of mercenaries that were paid to fight for them was a small one as well. Could they escape from this? Even if he said nothing, if they went through Katerina's things, there would be nothing left to do.

"They made important enemies left and right, and finally their leader was hung on suspicion of being a pagan. No matter how you reckon it, there's no way she'd turn into a friend of the Church."

"I-is this true?!" said Linguid, his voice sounding like a strangled chicken.

The man looked askance at Linguid's irritating voice and then hefted his spear threateningly. "Just ask her yourself." He grinned and not only because he had probably earned himself a bonus.

His eyes burned for revenge—no—for the chance to kill someone strong, someone whose glory was in the past.

"S-so? Is this true?" Linguid demanded as he looked at Fran.

Fran looked down and said nothing. There was no evading this. Fran's appearance and characteristics were unmistakable.

Lawrence directed his gaze at the cottage, then spoke.

"I'm sure the angel knows the truth."

"Wh-what? What do you..." *Mean*, Linguid was going to finish, but he didn't get the chance.

Fran swatted away the spear that was pointed at her like it was a fly.

Lawrence was just as impressed as anyone. It was easy enough to describe, but with a spearpoint at one's belly, actually doing it was not nearly so easy. It took either long experience or else a deep and abiding faith greater than any fear.

Fran took a step forward, and Linguid staggered back, perhaps able to feel the implacable *something* within her.

She took two steps forward, and Linguid took three back, and the man whose spear she had slapped away again pointed it at her.

"Fran Vonely, aren't you?"

Instead of answering him, she removed her hood. "And if I say I'm not?"

Her movement when pushing the spear aside and walking forward had been so natural that the man had not been able to react immediately. Fran looked back at him and smiled.

"The villagers called this faithful nun a witch simply for their own meager profit. And now these sly nobles are paying their gold to have her dubbed a saint, this time for profits far vaster. And here, this landlord would destroy all trace of her just to build a water mill to satisfy his own piddling avarice. What do you think of this—of all of this?"

The man seemed not to understand what was being said, and Linguid looked at her as though she were God herself, here to deal divine justice.

Fran very distinctly smiled and then looked at Lawrence. He had no idea what she was trying to do.

He did know that very soon Holo would appear atop the waterfall, there to terrify all present. Lawrence considered that and decided to try to stop Fran.

But he was not in time—perhaps it was Katerina's power.

"My name is Fran Vonely. Am I a saint? Or am I a witch?" She was directing her hellish sermon to the farmers from the village, most of whom had been rounded up for this duty. She projected her voice with perfect clarity. "You all know what the right thing was."

The murmur that arose was the sound of all assembled swallowing nervously.

Most of the soldiers there were residents of Linguid's land and knew perfectly well what they were doing. Spending their days trapped between pagan and Church beliefs, it was the faithful who always suffered the most—and who always had the most to fear.

"You'll know for certain when you do. After all, the angel is always watching."

There was a sound like a whistling wind—it was the sound of the man thrusting his spear without so much as a word.

He scattered the snow and cleaved the air, trying to pierce Fran.

The speed of the movements was far beyond anything Lawrence the traveling merchant could hope to stop. Very clearly, he saw the tip of the spear sink into Fran's side.

"You witch!" the man screamed, pulling the spear back and preparing for another thrust.

"Stop—!" Lawrence shouted, trying to leap at the man, but he was too late.

But the spear only grazed the top of Fran's shoulder, slicing her robe.

This was no miracle. A loosed arrow went into and back out of the man's right leg.

"—Ngh!"

The man crumpled to the snowy ground, looking at his leg in disbelief, at a total loss for words. It was one of the villagers that had loosed the arrow—a hunter, by the look of him. Faces were full of fear, breathing ragged, rough.

Everyone feared death. But Fran had sparked that fear anew.

"Protect the saint!" someone shouted.

A skirmish began immediately, and it was unclear who was an ally and who an enemy.

Chaplains had nothing but words to wield on the plain of battle. Just as they could give courage to those whose legs were weak with fear, they could comfort those whose death was nigh.

There were many here who feared divine punishment for having gathered around Katerina's cottage to harm the forest and lake where the angel's legend lingered. And true to her reputation as the black priestess, Fran had controlled them with her words.

Though her left flank was soaked in red, her expression had not changed, and she faced the landlord and spoke. "See for yourself what the truth is."

Lawrence thought Linguid was about to nod, but he just fell right on his backside. Such was the force of Fran's character.

Fran turned on her heel and began to walk.

"Wh-where are you—" Lawrence knew it was a foolish question, but he was unable to stop himself from asking.

Enough blood was seeping from the wound in her side that she stained the snow red with every step. She neither turned around nor stopped, but she did answer: "To see the angel myself."

Lawrence could not clearly hear her over the clamor of the fighting, but he understood what she meant. More than anything else, he felt the power of the faith that fairly radiated from her back.

At this late hour, it was neither hope nor delusion but pure conviction that drove her to bear witness.

He took an unthinking step, reaching out and putting his hand on his shoulder, but not to carry her back to the cottage and bandage her wound.

"Do you hear it?" Fran asked. Her voice was weak, perhaps from blood loss, and thanks to the noise around them, Lawrence asked her to repeat herself.

"It's the howl of a beast."

Lawrence shivered. He looked over his shoulder, knowing exactly what her words pointed to.

With animalistic roars, the men fought. Whatever their goal had been, they swung swords and spilled blood. Questions of Church or pagan were meaningless; they were each of them beasts, fighting only to preserve their own lives.

The sound, their voices, combined in a bestial roar, mixing and echoing into the sky.

But why had Fran mentioned it? Was it to mock them? Out of contempt? Or a cold laugh at this, the true nature of the world?

As Lawrence held Fran up and helped her walk, he finally realized. He had not imagined it. And it certainly had not been Holo. He recognized the sound. It reached his ears, a low howl: *Ooooooooo.*

At that moment, Lawrence remembered what Holo had said, that the lake was surrounded by mountains like a bowl. That the human notion of the mountains answering a shouted call was the product of their foolishness, she had said.

And then he remembered what Fran had told him in the cottage—that the water could overflow and powerfully.

Those two were the keys.

Lawrence looked up.

Next to the waterfall, like a shadow of the forest, he saw Holo's great form. She hesitated at the unexpected developments below.

Their eyes met; Lawrence nodded.

Holo leapt up atop the waterfall.

And howled.

The very air shook, the branches of the trees swayed, the surface of the water rippled.

Fran had told the landlord to see for himself what the truth was.

But the sight of Holo at the top of the falls, teeth bared as she bore up the moon and howled a long, long howl, was a sight both divinely awesome and monstrously terrifying.

Even Fran was rendered speechless.

Would the outcome be good or ill? Holo herself had been dubious and unwilling to emerge. But Lawrence had faith and convinced her that things would go well.

And here was the evidence. Her howl echoed across the landscape like a vast bell struck by a mallet.

Fran stiffened, and in the midst of all that, she murmured something.

"...It's coming."

Just as the howl subsided—

All Lawrence could hear were the breaths taken by the men, each frozen in place by Holo's gaze as she looked down imperiously at them all.

And then it reached their ears—the low, low rumble. The distant sound of an advancing army. The sound of heaven's footsteps.

Most lost their nerve and began to look around desperately.

The sound soon subsided.

And then nothing happened, and there was silence.

Someone pointed up at the waterfall. "H-hey, the monster, it's gone!"

"Did we really see anything...?" another murmured.

Lawrence knew they had, and Holo had not hidden herself to try to make them think otherwise. She had just perfectly guessed what Lawrence and Fran would do.



One of the soldiers called out. "The waterfall!"

With those words, the water of the fall slowed to a trickle. And then, an instant later, the trickle disappeared into a great wave.

The wave surged, swallowing everything in its path, then crashed into the rock at the tip of the waterfall that divided its flow in half, spraying into the night sky as though to wash the moon itself clean.

What happened next was impossible to explain to anyone.

The divided force of the wave caused great twin sprays of droplets to jump into the air, glittering whitely.

And it was so cold.

The spray turned to ice, illuminated by the moonlight.

The great volume of water falling into the splash pool made a peculiar sound, like the beating of great wings.

Blown by the wind, the frozen spray flew into the sky.

This was the legend of the angel.

"...Miss Fran!" Lawrence could not help but call out her name, holding her as she fell to her knees. Her face was peaceful, but her eyes were fixed elsewhere—somewhere far, far away.

Fran slowly reached her hand out and spoke one word. "Beautiful..."

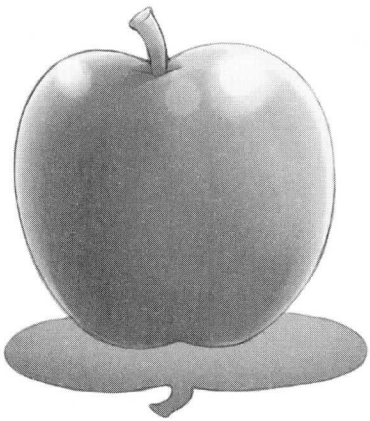
Those of the men who saw their own ugliness threw down their weapons and fled. Others fell to their knees, ashamed at their own faithlessness.

And the only one among them with true conviction turned her face to the sky, reaching for the beauty there.

The angel ascended to the heavens.

Droplets of ice glittered in the hem of the moonlight.

EPILOGUE



"And then what happened?!"

Hugues's large body pressed in close, and Lawrence shrunk back in spite of himself. He pushed the man back with his hand, which made the art seller seem to come to his senses.

Hugues sat back down in his chair, and fidgeting with his clothes, he repeated the question. "So, then what happened?"

"And then the village accepted the legend of the angel as true and most definitely came to believe in Katerina's sainthood. So that was that. However..." Lawrence sipped the mulled wine he had been offered before continuing. "...Neither the villagers nor the landlord can very well claim they saw both an angel and a monster, so they've decided to pretend to the rest of the world as though the whole thing never happened."

"Ah, I see...I see." Hugues leaned back in his chair like a boy listening to an adventure tale. He looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. Heaving a heavy sigh, he seemed finally at ease.

"You seemed calmer when we actually returned," teased Lawrence, which Hugues opened his eyes at and laughed.

"You go into a trance when things turn serious like that, after

all. Still, so that's how it all happened... When you brought her back here, I couldn't help but wonder what had wounded Miss Fran so grievously."

In point of fact, in Taussig the hunters and mountain men had put forth an all-out effort to tend to Fran's wounds. The reason they had returned before she was fully healed was that the villagers would not stop fussing over her. Holo, who so hated being worshipped as a god, was delighted to discover someone who loathed attention as much as she did.

It had been three days since they had taken Fran and put the village of Taussig behind them. They had arrived in Kerube the previous night and had all immediately made for their beds—save Lawrence, who Hugues dragged downstairs to explain the events in Taussig.

"But what was behind the angel legend after all?"

Lawrence popped a piece of honeyed fruit into his mouth before answering. "An avalanche."

"An avalanche?" Hugues repeated, stunned.

"That's right. A huge volume of snow from the mountainside slid into the lake, making a gigantic wave that crashed into the waterfall. The sound of the heavenly army's march was actually the sound of rushing snow."

"S-so then, what about the beast's howl?"

On this point, Lawrence himself was not entirely certain. But of all the possibilities, he chose the most likely one. "That was how it sounded after bouncing off of the lake. An echo, you see. This time it came from the sound of the men fighting. I'm sure sometime in the distant past there was some similar disturbance that caused it."

Of course, the climax had been Holo's voice, he added.

It made an amusingly good story, though—the sound of a battle calling down an angel. Going by Fran's guess, it might have

originally been the sound of a strong wind echoing off the mountain that first caused the avalanche.

Yet given his way, Lawrence liked the first story better.

"The world certainly is full of wonders."

"That's certain enough," said Lawrence with a rueful grin, and Hugues's shoulders shook with mirth.

"Still, if everything's settled now, perhaps I ought to visit Taussig myself sometime. Though I doubt I'll be as brave or bold as Miss Holo," Hugues joked.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

The question of who it would be at this late hour was soon answered.

Hugues stood from his chair with a chastened grin and walked over to the door.

Unlike the wilderness where you could sleep where you liked and make noise where you liked, within the town walls there were rules regarding the hours when candles could be kept burning. With buildings raised so close to one another, a stray flame left burning in one could easily set another alight.

It seemed the town guard had noticed the light coming from the candle on the table.

"Well, then, I'll take my leave," said Lawrence to Hugues's back as he stood up. If he waited for Hugues to return, he had the distinct impression that they would simply move to another room where he would be pressed for more stories, so he decided to make his retreat while he could.

He took his cup of mulled wine with him and climbed the stairs.

The steps creaked under his weight, and he followed the handrail to their room.

From the entrance, it looked like a small and rather poor building, but farther inside it became clear that it was a perfectly respectable four-story trading company.

Normally in trading companies, the higher in the building you were, the lower your status, so Lawrence and his companions being housed on the second floor was proof of Hugues's respect for them.

Making his way to the room where Holo and Col were sleeping, Lawrence noticed a sliver of light leaking into the hallway.

It was standard for burglars to enter from the second floor.

Lawrence peeked into the half-open door and saw that it was Fran's room.

"Yes?" His peek was immediately noticed.

She was human but well used to traveling alone and a world apart from a mere town girl.

"I saw the light and thought there might be a burglar."

Fran was sitting in her bed. A smile played about the corners of her eyes. "They say when caught, a burglar will always claim to have been trying to catch another burglar."

It was the sort of story that was swapped over drinks, but considering what they had just been through, it seemed appropriate.

"It's cold."

"You should soothe fresh wounds with cold and old ones with heat."

It seemed a rough method but probably an effective one. Lawrence preferred not to need the knowledge in the first place, if possible.

Chaplain—Fran had that title.

"I had always thought to end my travels once I saw the angel."

Blue moonlight streamed in through the open window, and her body itself seemed about ready to turn into light motes and disappear.

She was luridly wrapped in bandages around her middle and over her shoulder, and the fever she had borne in Taussig

had broken. And yet not once had Fran appeared even slightly weak.

Had she been unable to manage at least this much, she never would have been employed as a chaplain, responsible for the faith and morale of an entire troop.

"By travels, you mean...?" Lawrence asked.

Fran chuckled slightly. Perhaps it was a bit embarrassing for her. "I was a girl obsessed, I realize now."

She had planned to die.

The bloodstained scriptures and the letters pressed between the pages.

Fran's determination to find the legend of the angel could also have been called an obsession.

If those with claws and fangs are the first to die, then she truly might have been the very vanguard. And it was precisely that quality that had finally led her to the angel. But what she had thought at the end of her journey, Lawrence did not know. He did not know, but her face was beautifully peaceful now.

"We still haven't gotten that map from you," Lawrence prodded, which Fran turned away at, pouting.

The line of her chin in the moonlight shone like a sharpened knife. "More than once I've seen merchants venture out onto the battlefield in their efforts to be repaid."

"So are you saying I'll have to pass through the gates of heaven to get it?"

Fran closed her eyes, catlike. As Lawrence approached the bed, she opened them and fixed their dark pupils on him.

"Unfortunately, the scriptures say it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a merchant to reach heaven," Lawrence said.

He reached across her and gently closed the window. Her face

had looked slightly pained in the moonlight that shone through the open space.

"I'm afraid the same is true for me. I couldn't pass through the gates."

"So how about it, then? Helping others is a good way to atone for sins."

Fran smiled and then sunk slowly deeper into the covers.

It was probably still fairly painful for her to move, and she held up a hand to stop Lawrence from helping.

"If I let a merchant help me, who knows how many maps I'll end up having to draw." Her mischievous smile reminded him of a certain someone.

But then the supine Fran reached her right hand out. The same hand that had reached for the angel that appeared at the top of the falls.

"Payment for one," said Fran. She had probably picked up such affectations in her time with the mercenary troop.

Lawrence did not mind it. "I'll pay that." He took her hand and held it firmly.

If she had been a simple town girl, this was where he would have gone to kiss it. But Fran had no need for such things.

"God's protection be with you."

Having received such a meaningful blessing, Lawrence released her hand and tipped an invisible hat.

Fran nodded and slowly closed her eyes.

But as Lawrence turned to quietly leave the room, she spoke to him.

"Back then..."

"Hmm?"

"Back then, on the falls..."

Lawrence turned around. "On the falls?" he prompted, still smiling.

Knowing Fran, she would have noticed his mask. But she offered nothing more. "Never mind," she said, adding, "I suppose it was my imagination."

"Good night."

He left the room, and there was Holo.

Lawrence pretended not to notice her and went to the next room. She followed him in.

He closed the door, and the moon was the only light there at the beginning of the quiet night.

The End

AFTERWORD

It has been a while. I'm Isuna Hasekura, and this is volume 12. I suppose it's obvious to say, but volume 12 means that this is the twelfth time I've written an afterword. It doesn't feel that way at all, though...

I have to admit I'm sort of impressed with myself for coming up with the plot for this volume. This may be because back when I was trying to write volume 2, I had my head in my hands, certain that there wasn't anything else to write about.

Apparently they say you have to read a hundred books to write a single volume. For *Spice and Wolf*, I drew on forty or fifty. The rest are... let's just say they're offset by Holo's ears and tail.

It's only been three months since the last volume, so not much has changed in my life, but I did visit Okinawa for nine days during the writing of volume 12. It was a writing trip I took with a fellow author friend. I was worried that nine days trapped in a small room would make things tense during the bottom half of the trip, but things were surprisingly peaceful. I credit the Awamori liquor and Ishigaki beef.

We'd get up in the morning, have breakfast, write, have lunch,

write, nap, go swimming at the beach in front of the hotel, have dinner, write, and sleep. That was pretty much the routine. At one point we rented a car and drove to a beach farther away. At said beach, there were many people who just load up their car with a futon, a tent, and a dog and travel around Japan. I had no idea there was such a culture in Japan. Riding around on a motorcycle with a guitar strapped to your back—even light novel characters are a little better behaved than that.

We felt like we didn't want to lose to these guys, so we made plans to go to Paris next time or maybe some country in the south.

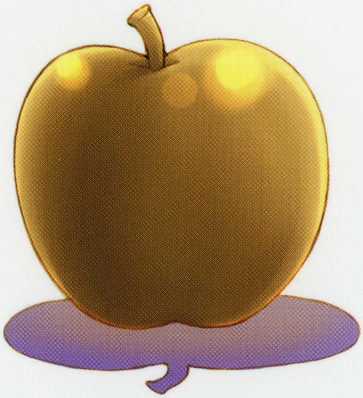
But if possible, I think I'd like to go in a state of cleanliness—having finished my work.

Now then, by the time this volume comes out, the second season of the anime should be reaching its peak, I think. I'll be enjoying that as I make preparations to write the next volume.

We shall meet again!

Perhaps in the autumn?

Isuna Hasekura



To obtain a map of the northlands, Lawrence and company leave the Kingdom of Winfiel and return to Kerube. While searching out a silversmith of notorious reputation, they are introduced to the beautiful Fran Vonely, who offers to provide what they seek. However, Fran's map comes with a price—in exchange, the party must travel with her to a village where an angel is said to have alighted and discover the truth behind the legend. But what of the rumor that a witch lives in that very same village...?

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