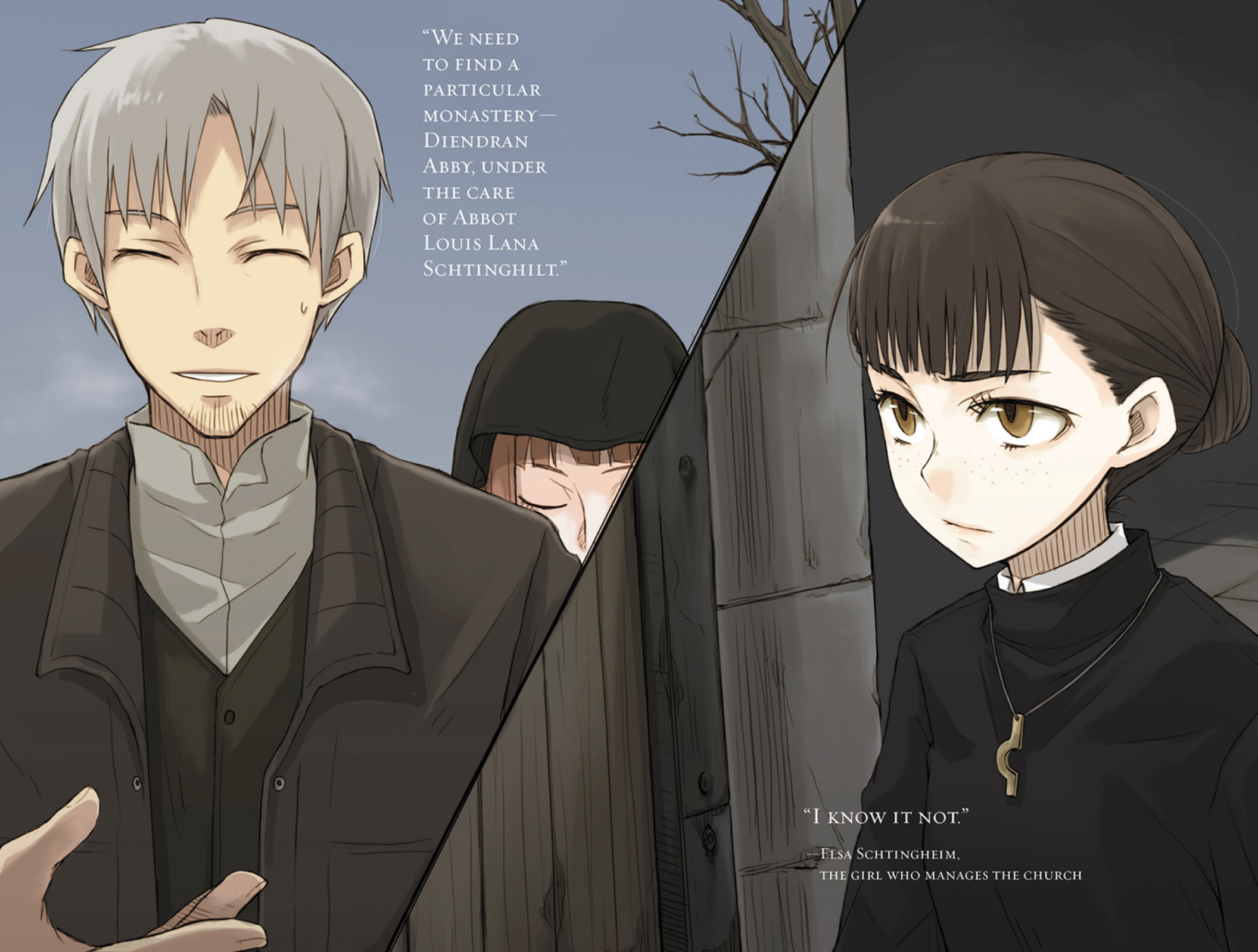

SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 4
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

Vol. 4

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura




"We need to find a particular monastery— Diendran Abby, under the care of Abbot Louis Lana Schtinghilt."
"I know it not."
—Elsa Schtingheim, the girl who manages the church


"However...what will you do after we reach your home?"
"I know not."


"Did something... happen?"
"We may cause you some inconvenience for a time. Please understand."
—Sem, the village elder of Tereo
The villager wielding the staff took a step forward. Lawrence noted this and stood.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Epilogue
Afterword



SPICE & WOLF

Volume IV

Isuna Hasekura

YEN ON
New York

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

The six days of winter travel had taken a toll on his body.

While it was fortunate that there had been no snow, cold was still cold.

What blankets he had were bought by the bundle and closer to softish boards than proper bedding. Anything that could plausibly ward off the chill had been stuffed under those blankets.

The warmest thing of all, naturally, would have been another warm-bodied creature, ideally one with fur.

If said creature could talk, though, well—that would be a problem.

"I cannot but muse that I am on the losing end of this bargain, 'tis true."

The sky was growing faintly brighter, the last vestiges of the night still caressing his face as though reluctant to leave.

Normally after being awakened by the cold, he would stare up at the paling sky for a time, unwilling to emerge from the blankets—but today his furred companion was obviously in a terrible temper.

"Look, I said I was sorry."

"Oh, aye, if it's a question of who is in the wrong and who should be apologizing, 'tis you and sure enough. I help ease night's chill as I can, and I'm even generous enough not to charge you for the favor."

The young man buried underneath the blankets, his face exposed and looking up at the sky, was Kraft Lawrence. He turned his head to

the left.

Lawrence had been on his own as a merchant since he was eighteen—seven years now—and he had a fair amount of confidence in his ability to talk around even the most unreasonable of customers.

But even this seasoned merchant found himself at a loss for words when confronted by his companion, who lay to his right, directing at him a displeased stream of words with a sharp gaze to match.

The girl with her dark red eyes and flaxen hair was named Holo.

It was a rare name, but that was not the only rare thing about her.

After all, she sported a pair of keen, beastlike ears atop her head, and a splendid wolf tail sprouted from her waist.

“And yet! There are things one may do and things one may not, nay?”

Holo would not have been as angry, presumably, if Lawrence had done something as easily understood as assaulting her in her bed while his wits were still dulled by sleep.

She would have simply mocked him mercilessly until he could barely stand, laughed a hearty laugh, and called it a day.

But no—the reason Lawrence endured this ceaseless stream of recrimination was because he had done something unforgivable.

What had he done? Owing to the cold, he’d unconsciously nestled his feet on Holo’s furry tail. Worse, when he turned over in his sleep, he had caught her fur.

The centuries-old Holo, the self-styled wisewolf, the girl who was sometimes called a goddess (though she hated it) had uttered a piercing, girlish cry—the pain alone must have been insult enough.

Nevertheless, Lawrence felt a bit aggrieved at his subsequent

treatment. He had been asleep, after all.

Despite the fact that even now Holo continued to rail at him, the instant his feet tangled in her fur and he stepped on her tail, she had punched him hard, twice, in the face.

Surely that was punishment enough, he felt.

"'Tis bad enough that you humans tread so easily upon one's feet when you are fully awake. But even when you are asleep! But lo—this tail is my pride! The only proof that I am me!"

Though the tail that Lawrence had rolled over was unharmed, a bit of fur had come free.

More than any pain, it was that indignity that infuriated Holo so.

Worse, before he'd rolled over, his feet seemed to have flattened a section of fur on her tail as they slept.

After staring dazedly at her tail for a moment, Holo tackled Lawrence, who had sensed that the situation was turning ugly and tried to escape from underneath the blankets, and she began to verbally assault him.

When angered, most would either turn cold and cruel or demand a duel of some kind. Holo's method of reprisal was far more effective.

It had been quite warm sleeping underneath the blankets with Holo, and the hour was just before dawn, and Lawrence's body was beleaguered after many days of winter travel.

It would hardly have been surprising if he began to doze off in the face of such unrelenting abuse.

If Lawrence's face betrayed even a hint of sleepiness, though, no doubt he would never hear the end of it.

It was like torture.

Holo would have made an excellent sheriff.

"Honestly, though..."

The interrogation did not cease until Holo exhausted herself with anger and dozed off again.

Lawrence was well aware that Holo's wrath was something to be feared and that anger could take many forms. He'd had no particular desire to discover yet another facet of it, but discover it he had—and having done so, he started the wagon moving along.

Worn out by her own tirade, Holo had stolen the blankets entirely and curled up like a caterpillar against the cold.

But she wasn't in the wagon bed. Instead, she lay sideways in the driver's seat, her head resting upon Lawrence's lap.

She certainly looked suitably meek and lovely, but given the timing...No, the depth of her calculation was frightening.

If she'd bared her teeth, that would have given Lawrence an excuse to fight back. If she'd ignored him, he could have ignored her in turn.

But forcing her head onto the merchant's lap only further worsened his position.

He couldn't get angry; he couldn't ignore her. And if she were to beg him for something to eat, he'd be unable to refuse her. Her actions, after all, made it clear that she was mollified.

Though the sun had now risen, taking the chill off the morning air, the sigh that came from Lawrence's mouth was a heavy one.

Despite warning himself that he would need to be more careful of Holo's tail in the future, it was hard to resist such warmth when camping in the winter.

If there had been a god to ask, he would've prayed: "What should I

do?”

But then the mute morning travels came to an unexpectedly sudden end.

As the pair had not passed anyone so far that day, Lawrence assumed that they had a long way yet to go. But as they crested a small hill, a town came into view.

He’d never been to this region before and lacked any sense of the lay of the land.

It was slightly to the east of the central region of Ploania, a vast nation that was home to both pagans and church followers. Lawrence wasn’t sure about the military importance of the area, but he knew it held little to interest a merchant such as himself.

The only reason he was here at all was because of the devilish girl who lay asleep on his lap.

He was guiding her back to her homeland, Yoitsu.

Because of the centuries that had passed since she had left, her memories of the details of the place were blurry and dim. Much had changed in the world over such a span of time, and Holo was eager to learn even the tiniest rumor of her homeland—all the more so now that she had learned of the legend recounting Yoitsu’s destruction.

Six days earlier in the town of Kumersun, they’d made the acquaintance of Diana, a chronicler who collected folklore. Diana had told them of a monk who specialized in tales of pagan gods.

The monk in question lived in a remote monastery, and only the Church priest in the town of Tereo knew its location.

The path to Tereo was not widely known, however, so the pair headed first to another town, Enberch, to ask directions.

It was that town at which they had finally arrived.

“I wish to eat sweetbread.” As they approached the town’s gatehouse, Holo stirred and awoke, and these were the first words from her mouth. “And by sweetbread, I mean—you know. *Wheat* bread.”

What she requested was not inexpensive, but Lawrence had no right to refuse her.

Lawrence didn’t know what would sell in the region, so he’d brought wheat with him—wheat he had bought from his friend Mark the wheat seller, to whom he owed a favor. But as Lawrence and Holo traveled, it was bitter rye bread he’d chosen for their rations.

His miserly decision had made him the target of no small amount of complaining on Holo’s part.

He couldn’t help thinking darkly of the high-quality, grandly risen bread Holo would no doubt demand.

“We’ve got to sell our goods first, in any case.”

“I suppose I’ll allow that.”

Truthfully it had been Holo who begged Lawrence to allow her to accompany him, yet most of the time Lawrence felt like her valet.

She seemed to notice Lawrence’s irritation. “Ah, but my lovely tail has been trampled ’neath your feet. ’Tis only fair that I trample upon you a bit in return,” she said mischievously, stroking her tail beneath her robe.

He’d expected Holo to continue complaining for some time, but it seemed she had spoken her piece.

Lawrence sighed inwardly, relieved, and turned the wagon toward the miller’s.

Though Enberch was remote, it seemed to be the acknowledged trade center of the region and fairly busy.

Lawrence and Holo had merely happened to approach the town from a less-trafficked direction.

Throughout the town square were carts loaded with grain, produce, and animals that had been brought from nearby villages. Buyers and sellers jammed the area.

There was a large church that faced the square, its doors flung open to accommodate the bustling trade it seemed to do. Through the doorway passed a steady stream of townspeople coming to pray or to attend service.

Enberch was the sort of rural town you could find anywhere in the world.

Upon asking at the gatehouse, Lawrence learned that the largest miller in town was the Riendott Company.

Though it was little more than a miller's shop, the word *company* had been tacked onto the end. It struck Lawrence as awfully countrified.

Yet past the north edge of the square on the right side of the clean, straight road, there stood the Riendott Company—complete with a wide storefront and grand loading dock. The merchant understood why this business would want to maintain its reputation.

He'd bought up about three hundred *trenni* worth of grain in Kumersun.

About half of this had carefully been winnowed and ground into flour. The remainder had merely been threshed.

The farther north one went, the harder it was to raise wheat—thus the price rose.

If a merchant was unlucky enough to encounter a few days of rain on his journey, the wheat would quickly rot—and in any case, it was too expensive for northlanders to afford as a staple, so finding buyers

could be difficult.

Lawrence mostly carried wheat simply because, as a merchant, he hated to travel with an empty wagon.

It was also because, having made a large profit in Kumersun, he'd decided to err on the side of prudence.

In any case, a town the size of Enberch should have a few nobles or Church officials rich enough to afford wheat, so Lawrence expected the Riendott Company would be willing to buy from him.

"Ho, is that wheat?"

It was Riendott himself who emerged to greet Lawrence, probably because Lawrence's wagon was loaded with wheat. Riendott was a round man, giving the impression more of a butcher than a miller, and his face seemed a bit troubled.

"Indeed. Half as flour and the other half in grain. I've a writ of quality to go with it."

"I see. I'll allow as how kneaded and baked it would make fine bread—but as you can see, we've had a huge harvest of rye this year. We simply lack the resources to deal with extra wheat."

The company's loading dock was indeed piled high with sacks of rye, and on the wall next to them, placards were affixed, upon which delivery destinations had been scrawled in chalk.

"Though for our part, wheat does yield a nice profit. We'd like to buy from you given the chance, but we've no spare funds on hand…"

The owner was surely thinking that rye—which was guaranteed to sell—was more important to him than wheat that might or might not be easy to sell, depending on the whims of wealthy customers.

Interpersonal relationships were important in business. This was doubly true in remote areas like Enberch. The miller could scarcely

afford a single traveling merchant disrupting his business with farmers who would bring in rye year after year.

"I gather that you're a traveling merchant—have you come to create a new trade route?"

"Nay, this is merely a side business."

"I see. May I ask your destination?"

"I'm bound for Lenos, but there's a place nearby I'd like to visit first."

Riendott blinked his surprise.

Though Lenos was yet farther north, it was sure that the master of a trade company—even one like this, a glorified mill—would know it at least by reputation.

"Good heavens, you're headed quite a ways…quite a ways, indeed."

It was obvious that Riendott assumed Enberch was the only town in the region worth a merchant's time.

"Aye, though I plan to stop in Tereo first."

Riendott's surprise was obvious. "Goodness, what would take you *there*?"

"I've business with the Church there. Ah, and merchant matters aside, would you happen to know the way?"

Riendott's gaze swam for a moment, as though he'd been asked the price of the very first good he had ever sold. "The road that leads there has no forks, so you needn't worry about losing your way. I'd say it's about half a day's travel by wagon. The road is poor, though."

Maybe it really had been a strange question to ask. Maybe there truly was nothing of note in Lenos.

Riendott hemmed and hawed for a moment, glancing toward Lawrence's wagon. "Will you be coming through Enberch on your return?"

"Unfortunately, no; I'm taking a different route."

No doubt the miller was contemplating buying on credit if Lawrence had been coming back through Enberch.

But no—Lawrence had no plans to add the region to his regular route.

"I see, well…unfortunately, I'm afraid we'll have to leave it at that, then," said Riendott, his face twisted with regret that was probably at least half-false.

Buying up expensive wheat from a traveler just passing through was a dangerous gamble.

The wheat flour could easily have been cut with flour from other grains, or it might merely appear to be of fine quality, only showing its true colors upon baking.

If the miller could buy on credit and defer payment for a while, then even if the quality was bad, he could con some distant countryside nobility into buying the wheat.

But Lawrence had no particular need to sell his wheat immediately.

The time was not right. He shook hands with Riendott and prepared to take his leave.

"I suppose 'tis true—the fastest way to sell wheat is not as flour, but as baked bread," said Lawrence.

Bread's quality could be easily determined with a single bite. A taste was far more effective than the grandest tale of a sack of flour's supposed quality.

“Ha-ha-ha. All us merchants think so. It’s a sore spot with the town bakers!” declared Riendott.

“Ah, so the bakers here are tough, are they?”

“Aye, and how. If anyone besides the bakers begins selling bread, they’ll come running, stone rolling pins brandished high!”

Merchants bought and sold, and bakers baked—this division of labor could be found anywhere in the world.

It was a reality, though, that if a merchant was to take over the entire process, from buying wheat to baking bread, the profits would be substantial.

As it was, the process between harvesting wheat to selling baked bread was long and involved many different people.

“Well then—God go with us,” said Lawrence.

“Indeed. I look forward to your future patronage.”

Lawrence gave Riendott a smile and a nod, and then he and Holo put the shop behind them.

Though Lawrence was mildly disappointed about not selling off the wheat, he was more concerned with Holo’s ominous silence.

“You didn’t say anything this time,” he said casually.

Holo’s reply was quick. “That miller, he said Tereo was a half day’s journey from here, yes?”

“Huh? Oh yes, he did.”

“So if we leave now, we can be there by nightfall,” said Holo, being strangely confrontational.

Lawrence leaned away from the tone of her voice. “I was thinking it would be nice to rest. You’re tired yourself, are you not?”

"If it's rest you need, we can rest in Tereo. If we're going, I'd prefer to go sooner."

Lawrence finally realized the reason for her unusually obstinate tone.

Though she rarely spoke about it, Holo clearly wanted to meet this monk who collected tales of pagan gods as soon as she possibly could.

Holo was stubborn and could be strangely proud.

She would consider it beneath her dignity to be constantly urging Lawrence to hurry.

But with their destination so close, the embers that smoldered in her chest were turning to blazing flames.

No doubt she *was* tired. The fact that she urged him on nonetheless proved how desperate her need for knowledge was.

"All right, then. But let's have a hot meal first? Surely you won't mind that."

Holo looked stunned at Lawrence's statement. "Need you even ask?"

Lawrence grinned—just as surely as Holo's stomach growled.

Just when it seemed that the gently rolling hills would never end, the landscape shifted—here it appeared that God had taken a more active hand in the molding of the terrain.

The undulating geography was like bread dough, carelessly folded over upon itself. A river flowed through the valley between the mounds, and here and there were lush stands of woods.

The wagon on which the pair rode made little creaking sounds as it bumped along the road following the river.

Lawrence looked over at Holo, wondering if he should have forced her to rest while they were in Enberch.

Between nightfall and dawn, the chill of winter made deep sleep difficult. One was always waking, then sleeping, and then awake yet again. Though Holo's true form was lupine, as a maiden she seemed to possess a maiden's constitution.

The long journey could not have been anything but difficult for her.

She leaned against Lawrence, asleep, looking utterly exhausted.

He considered asking for lodgings at the monastery.

It was possible that the accommodations would be plain, which Holo might grumble at...As Lawrence considered the matter, he noticed that the river was beginning to widen.

The river wound around a slope ahead so he could not see where it led. The basin was certainly widening, though, and the flow slowing.

And then a certain unmistakable sound reached his ears.

Lawrence immediately understood what lay ahead.

Holo's keen wolf ears picked up the noise as well. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked out from under her hood.

Tereo was close.

Just where the river's flow slowed to a stop, forming a small pond ahead, a snug little waterwheel and millhouse were situated.

"If there's a waterwheel here, we must be close."

In places where water was limited, people would store it up, and then use the elevation change to power the waterwheel.

Owing to the lack of water, the method worked for only so long—and with the harvest complete, the time when a line of villagers had

waited to grind their grain at the millhouse was past.

At the moment, the blackened, river weed–tinged millhouse merely sat there, forlorn.

Just as Lawrence drew near enough to the mill that he could begin to make out the grain of the wood from which it was constructed, a shadow leaped out from inside.

Surprised, Lawrence pulled back on the reins. His cart horse let out a disgruntled whinny, shaking its head from side to side.

It was a young man who had rushed out. His sleeves were rolled up despite the cold weather, and his arms were white with flour.

"Whoa—whoa there! Say, are you a traveler?" inquired the youth, coming around in front of the cart before Lawrence could either voice his irritation or continue along his way.

"...I suppose if you put it that way, aye, a traveler I am. And you?"

Though he was a boy, the youth could not have been more different from Amati, the lad against whom Lawrence had sparred in the marketplace a week earlier. The boy in front of him was slender but had a sturdiness born of physical labor. He was about Lawrence's height with the black hair and eyes that were common in the northlands. He looked strong enough that Lawrence imagined him wielding an oxbow. His black hair was haphazardly dusted with flour.

Asking this flour-dusted boy, who had just emerged from a millhouse, who he was would be like standing before a baker's stall filled with bread and asking what was for sale.

"Ha, well, as you can see, I'm a miller. So, where'd you come from? You don't look like you're from Enberch."

Lawrence found the boy's carefree smile rather childish.

He inwardly guessed the boy to be six or seven years his junior, and

he was suddenly wary of Holo catching yet another hapless pup's eye —creating yet another mess for Lawrence to clean up.



“As you might guess, I’ve a question for you,” said Lawrence. “How much longer will it take to make the town of Tereo?”

“The *town*…of Tereo?” repeated the youth, stunned for a moment. He then grinned and continued. “If Tereo’s a town, then Enberch is the royal capital! I don’t know what brings you out there, but Tereo’s a tiny smear of a village. Just look at this pitiful millhouse!”

Lawrence was vaguely surprised by the lad’s words until he remembered that like Holo, Diana (who had given him the information about the town) was hundreds of years old. In her time, Tereo may well have been the largest, busiest town in the region. Decline was hardly rare.

Lawrence nodded and posed his question again. “So how far, then?”

“It’s just ahead. Of course, it’s not like there’s a grand wall surrounding the place—you could even say you’re already *in* Tereo.”

“I see. Well, thank you,” Lawrence said shortly, guessing that left to his own devices, the lad would probably continue his rant.

Lawrence flicked the reins and began to ease the wagon around the boy, who became flustered and quickly moved to block the wagon’s path. “H-hey now, don’t be in such a hurry, eh, kind traveler?”

With the youth’s arms blocking the none-too-wide path, there was no way for Lawrence to get by.

It would have been easy enough to force his way past, but if the lad was injured, it would hardly leave a good first impression on the people of Tereo.

Lawrence sighed. “What business have you, then?”

“Ah, er—well…Ah! Your companion—she’s quite the beauty!”

Holo, her head covered by the hood she wore, suppressed a chuckle,

though her tail wagged her amusement.

Lawrence might feel the occasional frisson of superiority thanks to his charming companion, but lately his worries over the trouble she seemed to attract outweighed those brief flashes of pleasure.

"She is a nun on pilgrimage. Will that do? Only a tax collector can block the path of a merchant, sir."

"A-a nun?" The youth's surprise at the unexpected word was obvious.

Given the grand church at the center of Enberch, it seemed unlikely that the tiny village of Tereo would be entirely pagan. Even in the northern regions of Ploania, a pagan village would need considerable defenses to resist a nearby Church stronghold like Enberch.

Surely there was a church in Tereo—so why would the youth be surprised?

As Lawrence thought on it, the youth noticed his contemplative state. It seemed he was more concerned about Lawrence than Holo.

"Understood, traveler. I won't obstruct you any further. But listen to my words—you'd best not bring a nun into Tereo."

"Oh?"

It did not seem to Lawrence that the lad was joking.

Just to be sure, he nudged Holo beneath the blankets to get her appraisal. She nodded quickly under her hood, confirming his assessment.

"Why might that be? We've come with business at the Church in Tereo. Surely if there's a church, there's no reason for a nun not to enter the village. Or is there no—"

"N-no, there is surely a church. But the reason...there's a bit of a

fight, you see. With an unpleasant lot from the Church in Enberch." The youth's expression was sharp, like a newly trained mercenary.

The unexpected force of the youth's gaze took Lawrence momentarily by surprise, but then he remembered the lad was just a miller.

"So, that is how it is. How should I say it…? If a nun were to arrive now, things could become complicated. That is why I'd rather you didn't go." Putting away his hostility, the youth was now suddenly the picture of good-natured concern—but still, there was something strange about him.

Given that he did not seem to bear Lawrence and Holo any particular ill will, Lawrence decided not to question him further.

"I see. Well, we'll be cautious. Surely we won't be thrown out as soon as we arrive."

"Well…no, I don't suppose you will."

"My thanks to you. I'll keep your advice in mind. Suppose she's not dressed as a nun—no one would mind, then, would they?"

The youth seemed to relax. "That would be a boon, yes." His wariness of Lawrence seemed to have turned to entreaty. "But what business have you with the church?"

"We need directions."

"Directions?" The youth scratched his face, dubious. "So…so you haven't come to do business, then. You're a merchant, right?"

"Aye, and you're a miller, are you not?"

The boy grinned as though his nose has been flicked, then slumped, defeated. "And here I was hoping I might be of some use to you in business."

“I’ll call on you if need be. Now, may I pass?”

The youth seemed to have something yet to say, but unable to put the words together, he nodded briefly and gave way.

The look he gave Lawrence was a deeply imploring one.

It was clear, though, that he was not asking for an information fee.

Lawrence loosened his grip on the reins and extended his hand to the youth. He looked directly into the boy’s eyes, speaking clearly and evenly. “My name is Kraft Lawrence. What are you called?”

In an instant, the lad’s face blossomed into a smile. “Evan! I-I’m Gyoam Evan.”

“Evan, then. Understood. I’ll remember that.”

“Please—please do!” the young miller shouted in a voice loud enough to cause an easily startled horse to panic, gripping Lawrence’s hand tightly. “Come by upon your return, if you would,” he added as he stepped back from the wagon and into the doorway of the little millhouse.

He stood there in front of the black wooden millhouse, his face whitened with flour, looking distinctly lonely as he watched Lawrence and Holo drive away.

Then—just as Lawrence had expected—Holo turned to look over her shoulder, waving a hand tentatively to the youth. He started as if surprised, then returned her wave grandly with both hands, a huge smile on his face.

He seemed less like a lad waving to a beautiful maiden and more like a boy happy to have found a friend.

The path ahead curved to the right, putting Evan’s mill out of sight. Holo turned back around to face forward.

“Hmph. The boy seemed to look at *you* more than he did me,” she announced, displeased.

Lawrence smiled for a moment, then heaved a sigh and replied, “Well, he’s a miller. His is not an easy life.”

Holo regarded Lawrence dubiously, her head cocked.

There must have been a reason behind the lad’s desire to shake hands with Lawrence the merchant rather than Holo the maiden.

But was it a pleasant reason? Surely, the answer was no.

“It’s no different from being a shepherd. Both are necessary jobs, but the people who toil in them are held in contempt in towns and villages.”

Naturally depending on the region, this was not always the case. But Lawrence was quite sure that the people of Tereo did not hold the millhouse here in much regard.

“For example,” continued Lawrence, “think of the wheat that’s in the pouch about your neck.”

Holo did indeed wear a small pouch around her neck—though it was hidden beneath layers of clothing at the moment—which contained the wheat in which her essence dwelled.

“If you were to hull and grind that much wheat, how much flour do you think it would yield?”

Holo looked down at her chest.

She could control the harvest’s quality and quantity, but even she seemed not to be entirely sure how much flour would come from the handful of grain.

“Suppose you have this much grain,” said Lawrence, putting the reins down for a moment and tracing the outline of a small mound in

his hand. “If you hull and grind it, you’d probably get about this much flour,” he continued, making a much smaller circle with his index finger and thumb.

Once ground in a mill, wheat’s volume became surprisingly small.

So what must a farmer think, toiling day in and day out to raise his crop, praying always to the god of the harvest, only to see his months of labor ground into a depressingly small amount of wheat?

Holo uttered a small sound of assent after Lawrence put the question to her.

“They say that millers at the waterwheel have six fingers and that the sixth grows from the palm—for the purpose of stealing flour. Also, most waterwheels are owned by the local landlord, who levies a tax on all who grind their grain there. But the landlord can’t watch over the millhouse all day, so who do you suppose collects taxes in his place?”

“I suppose it would be the miller.”

Lawrence nodded and continued. “Aye, and no one is happy about paying taxes. But it is necessary. So who do you suppose bears the brunt of their resentment?”

She might not have been human, but Holo’s understanding of the human world was deep.

She knew the answer immediately.

“Ah, I see the way of it. So the reason that pup was wagging his tail with such vigor at you, rather than me, was—”

“Even so,” said Lawrence with a sigh and a nod. Ahead of them, the houses of the village of Tereo finally came into view. “He would like nothing better than to leave this village.”

Millwork was an important job that had to be done.

But those who did the thankless task were often resented.

The more thoroughly grain was ground, the better the rise of the bread made from it.

However, the finer the grind, the smaller the volume of the resulting flour.

Doing a good job yet bearing the resentment of those who benefited from it—Lawrence had heard the story somewhere else. Holo looked straight ahead, as though sorry she had asked.

"But it's a necessary task, and there are those who appreciate it," said Lawrence. He stroked Holo's head gently before taking up the reins again. Holo nodded slightly under his touch.

Though Evan had called it a tiny smear of a village, Tereo was not so bad as he would have Lawrence believe.

The only real difference between a town and a village was the presence of a wall. There were plenty of "towns" with walls barely more than a rickety wooden fence, so for a supposed village, Tereo was rather grand.

Like other villages, its buildings were not packed closely together (instead they had been erected in a more scattered fashion), but there was some stone-walled architecture in what seemed to be the heart of Tereo. The streets, while not cobbled, were clean and free from holes. The church was large enough to be visible a fair distance away, and it had a proper tower and bell.

Truly, in order to be called a town, all Tereo lacked was a wall.

Heeding Evan's warning, Holo covered her head with Lawrence's coat, cinching it up with a cord about her neck as though she expected rain. She eschewed her typical town-girl clothing. It seemed a bit too stylish and might attract attention.

Holo stood out enough as it was.

Once she had finished changing, Lawrence steered the cart toward the buildings of the village.

Having no walls meant there was no gatehouse, which in turn ensured that travelers passing through the village could not be taxed.

There was no one to stop the cart as it rolled into town. A man busy bundling sheaves of wheat stared openly at Lawrence and Holo; Lawrence nodded in greeting.

The village was dusty, its smaller streets bumpy and pitted. Buildings of both stone and wood were on the large side with low roofs. Many of the houses had gardens—a rare sight in larger towns.

Here and there along the roadside were piles of straw, the sign of the recently concluded harvest. Bundles of firewood were interspersed among them.

Pedestrians were few; it seemed as if they were outnumbered by the pigs and chickens that wandered here and there.

The one way that the village was like other places of its kind was the staring—upon noticing the travelers, every villager stared at Lawrence and Holo.

In this sense, Tereo was every bit a small village.

Lawrence felt his outsider status keenly in a way he hadn't felt in many years.

He had grown up in a poor village himself. He was well aware that such places offered little in the way of amusement and that a traveler was the perfect diversion.

Lawrence thought on this as he drove. They eventually arrived at a wide square with a great block of stone placed in the center.

It seemed to be the center of the village, surrounded as it was by various buildings.

Based on the wrought iron signs that hung from the buildings' eaves, there appeared to be a tavern, an inn, and a baker's shop, along with what seemed to be a wool weaver's workshop. A building with a larger entrance faced the street, and it was surely a common area where the harvested wheat could be threshed and sifted.

Other buildings seemed to be the homes of the village's older, more influential families—and of course, there was also the church.

There were unsurprisingly a good number of people—children playing in the square and adults standing and talking. Lawrence and Holo found themselves yet again the subject of curious stares.

"That's quite a stone there. What's it used for?" asked Holo casually, unconcerned by the villagers' scrutiny.

"Probably for ceremonial use in some festival or for dancing or maybe for holding meetings, I suppose."

The stone in question had a smooth, flat surface and came up to about Lawrence's waist. A wooden ladder leaned against it, which suggested the stone hadn't been placed here as a mere landmark.

The only way to know for sure would be to ask a villager, but Holo merely nodded vaguely and leaned back against the wagon seat.

Lawrence guided the wagon around the stone and toward the church.

Despite the constant bombardment of curious gazes, it was clear that this was no isolated mountain hamlet.

The wagon stopped in front of the church, at which point the villagers seemed to assume that the pair had come to pray for safe travel, and the level of interest dropped.

"Seems like they're almost disappointed," muttered Lawrence to Holo once he'd stopped the wagon and climbed down. Holo smiled conspiratorially.

The church was a grand stone building, its great wooden door framed in iron.

It seemed to have weathered many a year. The corners of the stone blocks that made up the edifice were rounded with age, though the iron knocker affixed to the church door seemed strangely unused.

It was odd, too, for the door to be closed. It wasn't a cloister, after all, nor did there seem to be a service in progress. The doors of any normal church would have been open.

If he had to put it simply, Lawrence would have guessed that the church was unloved by the village.

But there was no point in conjecture. Lawrence grabbed hold of the knocker and rapped it several times.

Klang, klang—the dry sound echoed strangely across the square.

There was no reply for several moments, but just as Lawrence was beginning to wonder if anyone was there, the door creaked loudly, opening just a crack.

"Who is it?" A girl's voice, none too friendly, was audible through the crack.

"I apologize for calling without notice. I am Lawrence, a traveling merchant," said Lawrence with an ingratiating smile. The girl on the other side of the door narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"A...merchant?"

"That's right. I've come from Kumersun."

Churches so cautious in their admittance were rare.

"...What about her?" The girl's gaze turned to Holo.

"Circumstances have led to her traveling with me," said Lawrence simply.

The girl looked back and forth between Lawrence and Holo before sighing softly, then slowly opening the door.

As the great door creaked open, Lawrence was surprised to see that the girl wore a long-sleeved priest's robe.

"What is your business here?" she asked.

Though Lawrence was confident he'd concealed his surprise, the robed girl bore a severe expression that matched her tone. Her dark brown hair was bound up tightly, and her honey eyes glittered with challenge.

Her attitude aside, this was the first time Lawrence had ever been asked what his business was upon calling at a church.

"Ah, yes—I'd like to speak to the priest, if that is at all possible."

Normally it was impossible for women to serve in the Church's priesthood. The organization was entirely patriarchal.

That had been Lawrence's assumption when he'd asked the question, but the girl's brows only furrowed more deeply at his words.

She looked deliberately at her own robe before replying, "Though I am not a full priest, I am responsible for this church. My name is Elsa Schtingheim."

A woman in charge of a church—and such a young one at that.

Lawrence would have been less surprised to discover that the owner of some large, successful company was a woman—and that would've been surprise enough.

Elsa seemed to be used to this reaction. Again she calmly asked her question: "What is your business here?"

"Ah, er, we wish to ask directions..."

"Directions?"

“Yes. We need to find a particular monastery—Diendran Abbey, under the care of Abbot Louis Lana Schtinghilt.”

As Lawrence said it aloud, the similarity between the abbot’s name and Elsa’s occurred to him. Elsa’s surprise was immediately clear.

But before Lawrence could so much as ask what was wrong, she wiped the look of surprise from her face. “I know it not,” she said.

Elsa’s words themselves were polite enough, but her severe mien revealed her true feelings. She began to close the door without waiting for Lawrence’s reply.

Yet what sort of merchant would he be to let the door be closed in his face?

Lawrence quickly jammed his foot in the crack before it could close, smiling. “I have heard that there is a priest here by the name of Franz.”

Elsa glared bitterly down at Lawrence’s foot before looking him dead in the eye. “Father Franz passed away in the summer.”

“Wha—?”

She took advantage of his surprise to continue. “Are you satisfied? I know not of the abbey you seek, and I’m very busy.”

Lawrence felt that if he was to persist and she was to call out for help, he’d be in trouble.

He withdrew his foot. Elsa gave one last angry sigh, then closed the door.

“…”

“She certainly hated you.”

“Maybe it’s because I didn’t leave a tithe.” Lawrence shrugged and looked over at Holo. “Is it true that Father Franz is dead?”

“She did not seem to be lying. However—”

“She *was* lying when she said she didn’t know of the abbey.”

Lawrence could have been blindfolded and still seen through that lie so obvious was her surprise at hearing the abbey mentioned.

But was it true that she was in charge of the church? It seemed a dangerous thing to joke about.

Perhaps Elsa was Father Franz’s daughter, if not by blood, then by adoption.

“What shall we do?” asked Lawrence.

Holo’s reply was quick. “In any case, we cannot force our way in. Let us find an inn.”

Still the object of many a curious gaze, the two reseated themselves in the wagon.

“Ooh…It has been so very long…,” said Holo, flinging herself onto the bed and stretching out.

“It certainly trumps sleeping in a wagon bed, but mind yourself—there may be bugs.”

This bed was not wool or cotton stretched over a wooden frame, but rather had a mattress made from tightly bound straw. Most likely there were insects hibernating within the straw, waiting for the summer breeding season.

He knew that it mattered little whether she heeded his caution or not. Insects would love her fluffy tail.

“Mind myself? Why, I’m already followed about by the largest bugs of all.”

Holo grinned mischievously, her chin cupped in her hands.

Lawrence sighed. It was true—she would attract *that* sort of insect, too.

"This is a very small village. Don't cause a fuss," he said.

"That will depend entirely on your attitude." After sneering unpleasantly at Lawrence, Holo rolled over, her tail swishing, and yawned hugely. "I'm tired. Might I sleep?"

"And if I say no?" Lawrence asked with a chuckle.

Holo looked over her shoulder and narrowed her eyes suggestively. "Why, I would doze off at your side."

Humiliatingly, Lawrence considered the possibility and did not find it at all unpleasant. He coughed, avoiding her gaze—which made it all too clear that she saw right through him—and decided to avoid a confrontation. "Well, I suppose you really are tired, yes? If you rest now before you collapse from exhaustion, that would be a boon to your traveling companion."

"Hmph. Well, in that case, I shall take my rest."

Holo abandoned her offense and closed her eyes.

Her swishing tail flicked to a halt as well. Lawrence felt like he might hear her snore any moment.

"But first take off that cap and the robe about your waist as well and my coat that you just tossed aside there. Fold it neatly, and put a blanket on the mattress. Honestly." Lawrence couldn't help thinking of the spoiled princesses that showed up in stage plays.

Holo did not so much as move her head at Lawrence's nagging.

"If the clothes aren't folded by the time I get back, you won't get a nice dinner."

It was as though he were scolding a disobedient child. Holo played

the role to a tee as she looked up sharply. “You’re too kind to really do that.”

“...You’ll meet a bad end someday.”

“Oh, aye, *if* you can bring yourself to do something about it. Never mind that—are you going out somewhere?”

Holo’s eyes were beginning to look bleary even as she spoke. Lawrence couldn’t help walking over and drawing the blanket over her. “I wouldn’t bother if we were just passing through, but as it seems we’ll be staying here for a bit, I’d best see the village elder. The elder might know where the abbey is as well.”

“...I see.”

“Quite. So you just sleep here.”

Holo tugged the blanked up over her mouth and nodded.

“I doubt I’ll find a souvenir for you, though.”

“...I care not.” Holo’s eyes opened slightly, and she added in a sweet, soft voice that sounded like she might drift off to sleep at any moment, “So long as you return...”

He knew it was a trap, yet was still unable to conceal his fluster.

Holo’s ears pricked up happily.

She might not be getting a souvenir, but she’d been able to see his foolish face.

“I’ve already got my souvenir. Good night.”

Holo snuggled in beneath the blanket. “Sleep well,” Lawrence replied by way of surrender.

Lawrence unloaded some wheat from his wagon bed into a

moderately sized bag, and once he'd asked the innkeeper where the village elder's house was, he left the inn.

The local children seemed very concerned with the traveler who had come to their village during the dead of winter. As soon as Lawrence opened the inn door, though, they scattered.

To hear the innkeeper tell it, the festivals held in the spring and fall —for planting and harvest, respectively—attracted some people from outside the village, but since Tereo was well off the beaten path, visitors were generally rare. At the moment, Lawrence and Holo were the only guests at the inn.

The Tereo village elder's home was the grandest building facing the square. Its foundations and ground floor were made of stone while the second and third floors of the stately edifice were constructed from wood.

The front door had the kind of iron frame Lawrence expected to see on a church door, and it was finely wrought with subtle designs.

The door knocker was fashioned in the shape of a lizard or a snake and was a bit tasteless.

It was probably to venerate a local deity of some kind. Snake and frog deities were surprisingly common.

"Excuse me, is anyone home?" Lawrence said as he rapped the knocker. After a short while, the door opened and a middle-aged woman emerged, her apron and hands covered in a dusting of flour. "Hello—who might you be?"

"I apologize for the intrusion. My name is Kraft Lawrence; I am a traveling merchant. I've—"

"Oh, goodness. Elder, sir! The one everyone's been talking about—he's here!"

Though Lawrence was taken aback at having been cut off so

abruptly, the woman seemed not to take notice as she turned around and called out, “Elder, sir!” again, walking back into the house.

Having been so roundly ignored, Lawrence cleared his throat in order to center himself.

At length, the woman returned, escorting a small, elderly man carrying a cane back to the door.

“See, here he is!”

“Mrs. Kemp, you’re being rude to our guest.”

Lawrence heard the entire exchange, though he was not so narrow-minded as to become angry.

And anyway, a cheerful village wife could be a powerful ally when doing business.

Lawrence smiled brilliantly at the two.

“Please forgive our terrible manners. I am Sem, elder of the village of Tereo,” said the old man.

“I’m very pleased to meet you. I am Lawrence, a traveling merchant.”

“Well, now, Mrs. Kemp, do go back inside and take up with the others…Goodness, my apologies, sir. A visitor so late in the season sets all the idle goodwives’ tongues wagging.”

“I surely hope the rumors are good ones.”

Sem smiled. “Come, come in,” he invited, leading Lawrence into the house.

A hall led straight in from the entrance. Lawrence could hear laughter issuing from a large room farther inside the house.

As he walked, flour dust tickled at his nose. No doubt the women

were chatting and laughing as they kneaded the newly ground wheat flour into bread dough.

It was a common sight in the countryside.

"If you head into the inner room, you'll end up white with flour! Come, follow me," said Sem, opening the door to a large room. He gestured for Lawrence to enter first, then followed.

Lawrence was immediately stunned.

A giant snake was coiled up atop the shelf against one wall of the room.

"Ha-ha-ha, be at ease. It is not alive."

Lawrence looked again, and true enough, the black gleaming scales were dry, and the body was wrinkled. The skin had been dried, stuffed, and sewn back together.

He remembered the snake-shaped knocker on the door. Perhaps the village truly did worship a snake deity.

At Sem's suggestion, Lawrence took a seat, thinking he would have to ask Holo about this later.

"So, then, what business is it that brings you to our humble village?"

"Ah, yes. First, as we're staying in your village, I should offer my regards. Here is some of the wheat I have stocked," offered Lawrence, producing the sack of wheat he had filled for the occasion. Sem blinked rapidly.

"Goodness gracious! Most traveling merchants these days start talking business from the first word out of their mouths."

This was a bit unpleasant for Lawrence to hear, given that it described him perfectly—up until recently.

“And what would your other goal be?” asked Sem.

“Ah, well. We are looking for an abbey and were hoping you would know its location.”

“An abbey?”

“Yes. We inquired at the church earlier, but unfortunately they did not know it.” Lawrence’s expression was troubled, though his keen merchant eyes continued to watch Sem carefully for any reaction.

He saw Sem’s gaze drift for just a moment.

“I see…Unfortunately I, too, have heard of no abbey in this region. Where did you come by this information?”

Lawrence’s gut told him that Sem knew.

But if he were to lie about his source of information, it could become troublesome later. He decided to be honest.

“In Kumerson. A chronicler there told me.”

Sem’s mustache twitched.

Lawrence was sure he was hiding something.

No—not just that, Lawrence realized.

Sem and Elsa did not just know where the abbey was, they knew what could be found there.

Diana had told him about a monk there—a monk who specialized in collecting tales of pagan gods.

If Sem and Elsa knew about this, too, they might have been pretending ignorance to keep from getting involved.

In any case, Father Franz—the man Diana told Lawrence to ask about this abbey—had already been called to heaven.

It was hardly surprising that those he left behind wanted to close the door on the matter.

"The chronicler in Kumersun told me that if I spoke with Father Franz, he would be able to tell me where the abbey is."

"Ah, I see…Unfortunately, this summer, Father Franz…"

"Yes, I heard."

"His loss was hard. He devoted many years to his labor for the village." Sem's sorrowful expression did not seem to be an act, but neither was it borne of respect for the Church.

Something seemed awry.

"And now Miss Elsa has taken his place?"

"Even so. She's quite young—no doubt you were surprised."

"Surprised indeed. So then—"

Lawrence was about to continue when there was a pounding at the door, and a voice cried out, "Elder!"

The questions Lawrence wanted to ask welled up in his throat, but there would be no gain in haste, he decided.

"You seem to have another visitor. I had best take my leave. I am worried about my companion."

"Oh, goodness. I am most sorry I was unable to be of any service."

The knocking continued for a while until Mrs. Kemp went to answer the door.

"I hope the tidings are good ones," Lawrence heard Sem murmur when a man wearing traveling clothes, his face red and sweaty despite the cold, entered the room briskly, brushing past Lawrence on his way to Sem.

“Elder, I’ve brought this!”

Sem gave Lawrence an apologetic look, and with a smile, Lawrence left the elder’s home.

He felt he had given a good representation of himself as a traveling merchant.

It should be a bit easier to stay in the village now, Lawrence thought.

But what was it that the man had brought to Sem?

Upon leaving the elder’s home, he immediately saw a horse whose body fairly radiated heat. It had not been tied at a post, but simply left there. A group of children gazed at the animal from a distance.

Based on the horse’s tack, Lawrence could tell that it had been ridden some distance; the man, too, had been dressed for travel.

For a moment, he wondered what would cause a villager to go on such a journey, but then he remembered he had not come here to do business.

His first priority had to be getting Elsa or Sem to tell him the location of the abbey.

So how to do it?

Lawrence remained deep in thought as he returned to the inn.

Holo was sprawled out so comfortably on the bed that Lawrence couldn’t help but lay himself down beside her for a nap, only to fall fast asleep.

When he awoke, the room was dim.

“There’d be a poor dinner unless the clothes were folded, nay?”

He opened his eyes and sat up, realizing he was now covered in a blanket he had no memory of using.

"You're too nice to really do that," he said, repeating Holo's earlier line back to her through a yawn.

Holo giggled as she groomed her tail.

"Seems I slept for some time. Aren't you hungry?" asked Lawrence.

"Even if I was, surely you know I am far too kind to wake you from slumber."

"And you didn't take the opportunity to slip some coin from my coin purse?"

Holo merely grinned in her peculiar way, baring her sharp fangs.

Lawrence rose and opened the wooden window, gazing outside as he worked the kinks out of his neck.

"Night falls early here. It's not so late, but the square is deserted."

"And nary a stall to be found. Will we be all right for dinner?" said Holo, worried, suddenly concerned as she looked at Lawrence, who sat on the window frame.

"We'll be fine if we go to the tavern. It's not as though this town sees no travelers at all."

"Hm. Let us hurry, then."

"I've only just woken—oh, fine. Fine!" Lawrence shrugged at the glare he caught from Holo, then noticed something as he got to his feet. "What's that?"

A single, shadowy figure moved across the dim, deserted town square.

As he narrowed his eyes, Lawrence realized it was Evan the miller.

“Oh?”

“—!” Lawrence very nearly cried out in surprise as Holo appeared at his feet. “Don’t just appear like that!”

“My, but you are a skittish one. Never mind that—what did you see?”

Anyone would be frightened if someone appeared before them without so much as the slightest hint of rustling clothing, but Lawrence was not up to quarreling over every one of Holo’s japes. “Nothing important,” he said. “I just wondered where he was heading.”

“Seems he’s bound for the church.”

Millers had to be more honest than any other profession.

Back in Ruvinheigen, Norah the shepherdess was probably attending Church services just as assiduously as ever, even though that same Church imposed difficult constraints upon her work.

Evan might go to services just as often.

“Quite suspicious,” said Holo.

“We’re the suspicious ones.”

As Lawrence and Holo bantered, Evan knocked lightly on the church’s door. His knocking had a strange rhythm to it, as though it were a secret sign to communicate his identity.

There was a furtive quality to his movements, which only seemed strange until Lawrence recalled Evan’s vocation.

And it did not seem that the Church was well regarded in this village, either.

Lawrence turned away from the window with a sigh of faint disappointment when Holo tugged at his sleeve.

“What?”

In response to his question, Holo merely pointed her finger out the window.

Assuming she was pointing at the church, Lawrence looked back out the window at the building.

He was surprised by what he saw there.

“Oh ho, so that’s how it is,” murmured an amused Holo as her tail swished as though sweeping the floor.

Lawrence was mesmerized for a moment by what he saw, but he soon returned to himself and closed the window.

Holo immediately looked up at him, annoyed.

“Only the gods may spy on others’ lives,” he said.

“...Hmph.” Holo said nothing further, only glancing in displeasure at the now-closed window.

When Evan had knocked at the church door, it had of course been Elsa who answered.

As soon as she emerged, Evan had gathered her up in a tight embrace, as though she was something very precious.

Given Elsa’s manner as she leaned in to Evan, it was hard to dismiss the embrace as a mere greeting between friends.

“Are you not interested, then?” Holo asked.

“Perhaps if they were secretly talking of business, I would be.”

“They may well be. My keen wolf ears could listen in—what say you?”

Holo narrowed her eyes and grinned a lopsided grin that showed a

single fang.

"To think you'd be interested in such nonsense," said Lawrence with a long-suffering sigh.

Holo narrowed her eyes even further. "What's wrong with being interested?" she growled.

"Well, it's certainly nothing to be complimented on."

Pressing one's ears against the wall for hours at a time to overhear someone's business secrets was no vice—indeed, it was the paragon of mercantile cunning. But eavesdropping on lovers—it was the height of boorishness.

"Hmph. 'Tis not as though I am motivated by vulgar curiosity," asserted Holo, folding her arms. She cocked her head and closed her eyes, as though trying to remember something.

Lawrence was genuinely interested to hear what besides curiosity could possibly be her motivation.

She stood that way for a while, and then she finally spoke. "If I absolutely must give a reason, I suppose it would be to study."

"Study?" It was such an ordinary response that Lawrence couldn't help but feel disappointed.

What would Holo possibly need to study?

Did she have designs to swindle the monarch of some kingdom?

He briefly considered demanding tax exceptions from this hypothetical king should her plan succeed before shaking his head to clear it of the ridiculous notion. He reached for the water jug to have a drink, and Holo continued.

"Indeed, study. To see how you and I must look to other people."

Lawrence's fingers bumped clumsily into the jug, tipping it over. He

tried to recover it and failed.

"Listen, you. Would you not agree that one needs an outside perspective in order to truly understand a situation? Are you listening to me?"

Lawrence knew Holo was chuckling under her breath, and even without turning around, he could guess the expression that she wore.

Fortunately, there had not been much water in the jug, so it was hardly a disaster—though the teasing he now endured was disaster enough.

"So that is how I look to others when I'm with you...," said Holo, mulling it over, her voice serious.

Lawrence shut his ears in an effort to stop himself from reacting further and began to wipe up the water he had spilled.

He didn't know what he should be angry about.

He didn't even know why he was so irritated.

Perhaps it was the fact that he had been so obviously flustered.

Holo giggled. "Well, at least I know we're certainly a match for them."

Lawrence couldn't guess what sort of trap he might fall into if he was to respond to this.

He put the jug in its place after finishing what little was left with a gulp.

He wished the water had been strong wine.

"Now then," Holo said shortly.

Lawrence knew that if he ignored her, it would only bring down her ire.

If it came to a fight, he would certainly lose.

He sighed and turned to Holo, defeated.

“I’m hungry,” she said with a smile.

She was always a step—or two—ahead of him.

CHAPTER TWO



CHAPTER TWO

"Hah, *that's* the way to drink!"

Surrounded by a happy tumult in the tavern, Holo—dressed now in her town-girl clothing—set her large rustic mug down on the table.

A saintly beard of white foam rimmed her lips, and she kept her hand on the mug's handle as if to say, "Another round!"

One after another, the amused patrons of the bar added to Holo's mug from the contents of their own, and soon hers was filled again.

Though no one knew who the two mysterious travelers arriving in their town so suddenly were, the pair were generous in treating the tavern's patrons to liquor and drank full well themselves—their conduct would be well received in any village.

One of the pair was a beautiful lass to boot. They could hardly fail to impress.

"Come now! You can't call yourself a man if you'd lose to your pretty companion!"

Holo's hearty drinking ensured that Lawrence would be urged to drink as well, but unlike Holo, he had come for information.

He could not afford to let himself be jollied into drinking himself into a stupor.

He drank just enough not to spoil the festive mood, eating the food that was brought out and gradually making small talk with the villagers.

“Ah, this is fine ale indeed. Is there some secret to its brewing?”

“Ha-ha-ha, right there is! It’s Iima Ranel, the mistress of this tavern. She’s famous around here—her arms are as strong as three men, and she has the appetite of five!”

“Don’t tell the travelers such lies! Aye, here you are, fried garlic mutton.”

The woman in question, Iima, lightly knocked the edge of a wooden plate against the man’s head, then efficiently laid the food out on the table.

With her curly red hair tied back and her sleeves rolled up to expose her powerful-looking arms, a glance at Iima’s robust build made it easy to understand why some said she had the strength of three men.

The man’s reply, though, did nothing to answer Lawrence’s question. “Ouch, damn you! And here I was about to sing your praises!”

“So what you said just now wasn’t praise? You got what you deserved, then!”

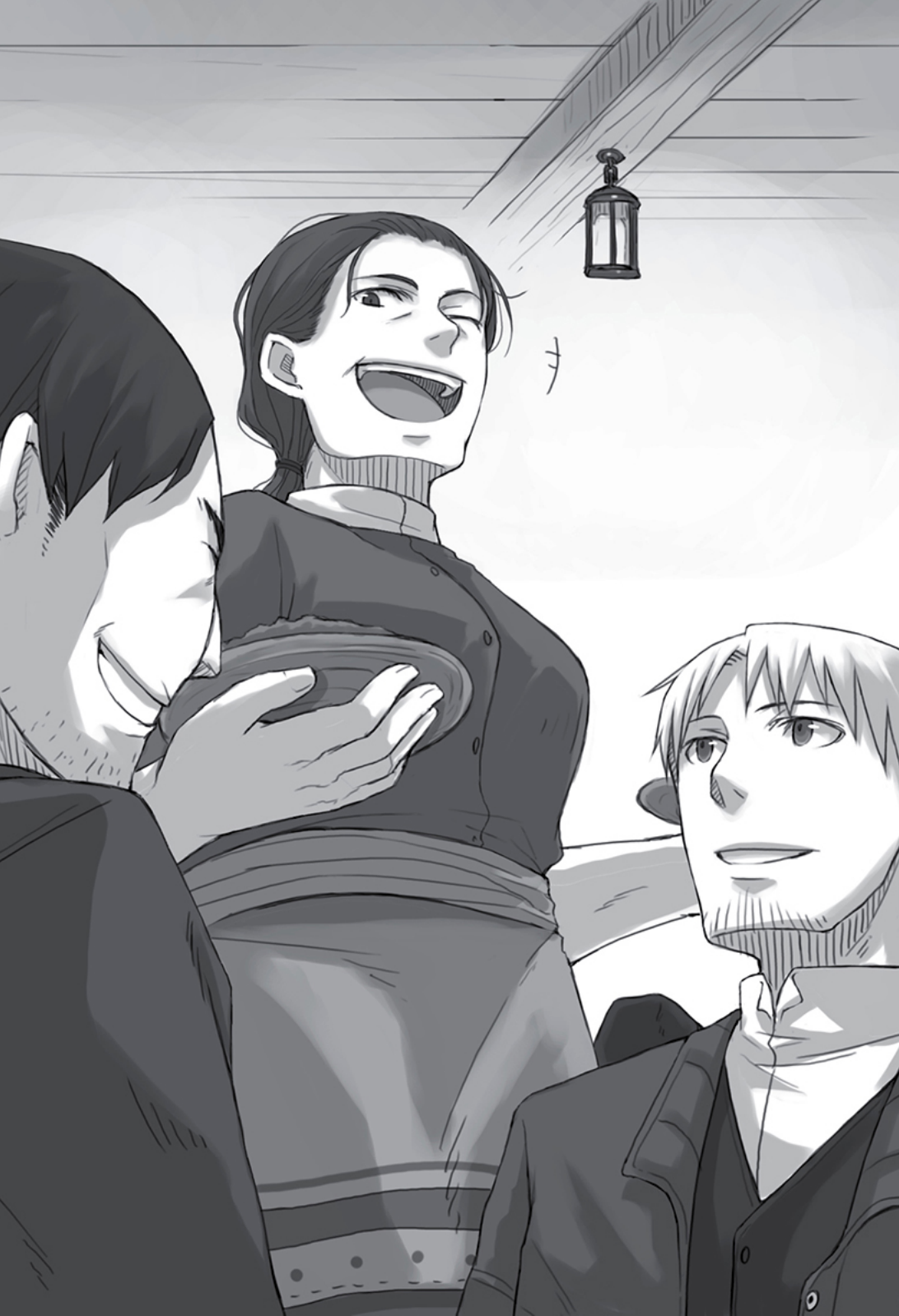
Everyone at the table laughed. A different man continued the topic at hand. “The mistress here used to travel with a brewing jug over her shoulder!”

“Ha-ha, surely not,” said Lawrence.

“Ha! No one believes the tale when they first hear it. But it’s true, isn’t it?”

Iima, who was by now serving the drunken patrons of another table, turned around at the question. “It surely is,” she answered. Once she finished serving the other table, she returned to the one at which Lawrence sat. “I was younger and prettier then. I was born west of here in a town along the coast. But it’s the fate of such towns to be swept away by the sea, and one day a huge ship pulled into port,

and soon the town was swallowed into the waves.”



Lawrence soon realized that she was talking about pirates.

"Then I got mixed up with the crowd as it rushed away, and at some point, I noticed I was carrying a brewing jug and a sack of barley," recalled Iima, her face wistful as she looked off into the distance. She wore a little smile, but it must have been hard at the time.

A man at Lawrence's table thrust out a mug. "Here, one for you, too, Iima."

"Ah, my thanks. Anyway, a girl on her own wouldn't have a prayer of finding work in some strange town, and there'd been rumors of pirates striking towns three mountains away. So I just used the river water there along with my brewing jug and barley, and I started brewing ale. And who would be the ones to drink that brew but a passing duke and his men come from afar to check on the resistance against the pirates."

Iima was interrupted by applause. She took the opportunity to finish her ale in a single, great gulp.

"Ah, in truth, I've never been so embarrassed as I was that day! And to have the duke discover that this young girl with the tangled hair and dirty face had been brewing ale in the forest—why, when I asked him about it later, he told me he'd thought I was a dryad! I suppose he had an eye for such things."

Again applause rose, this time from elsewhere. Lawrence looked and it appeared that Holo had won another drinking contest.

"But then, wouldn't you know it—the duke said my ale was delicious! He said that as the town they were heading to had been sacked by pirates, he and his men would be unable to get decent drink there, so he asked me to travel with his company and brew for them!

"Indeed, the ambitious young maiden, Iima Ranel, thought things were finally going her way.

“But alas! The duke already had a beautiful consort!

“Ah, ’tis well, I thought—my beauty would be wasted on such a homely nobleman, anyway. Though I had hoped for a black marten fur coat.”

“So you became his personal brewer, then?” asked Lawrence—but no sooner had he asked the question than he realized that couldn’t possibly have been the case.

If she’d been the personal brewer to a nobleman, she would hardly deign to run a tavern in the village of Tereo.

“Ha-ha, no, that would be impossible. At the time, I did not know the ways of the world, so it was surely my dream—but no. But as thanks for traveling with the duke and his men, I was able to dine in his absurdly large mansion, and I was given special permission to sell ale under the duke’s name, and that was boon enough.

“So that’s where the story of the rare ale-selling maiden begins—call it ‘The Brewer Maid’s Tale.’”

Iima pounded the table once with her fist, giving everyone sitting around it a start.

“So that is how I came to wander the land, brewing and selling, selling and brewing—many things happened, but for the most part, the road was easy. But then I made a single mistake—”

“Aye, Iima visited Tereo, and tragedy followed!” someone called out with perfect dramatic timing.

It seemed to Lawrence that Iima’s tale was probably told to every traveler that passed through the village.

“I never drank the ale I brewed, you see,” continued Iima, “for I wanted to sell every drop. I’d never had a proper taste myself, but when I came to this village, I tried it for the first time, fell in love with it, and in my drunken state, stumbled right into the arms of my

honorable husband!"

Lawrence laughed as he imagined the rueful grin that had to be on said husband's face at this moment as he toiled in the tavern's kitchen. As for the rest of the audience, they feigned tears.

"And so I became the tavern keeper's wife. But this village is a good one—do take your time and enjoy yourselves," finished Iima with a pleasant grin, then left the table.

Lawrence watched her go, a guileless smile on his face.

"Ah, but this is a fine tavern. I doubt you'll find its equal even in Endima," he said.

Endima, capital of the kingdom of Ploania, was the largest city in the northern region of the kingdom—larger even than the Church city of Ruvinheigen.

Saying something couldn't be found even in Endima was a common way to extol the virtues of the smaller towns and villages of Ploania.

"Aye, right you are! You may be but a traveling peddler, friend, but you've got an eye for quality."

Everyone liked to hear his or her hometown praised.

The men around the table all grinned and drank from their mugs in unison.

Now's my chance, Lawrence thought.

"Indeed!" he said. "And the ale's fine, too. Truly this village must enjoy God's blessings," he continued, casually slipping the statement into the flow of conversation.

Yet his words hung there like a drop of oil in water.

"Ah, excuse my rudeness," he added.

He'd heard countless tales of other merchants who had misspoken while drinking wine in some pagan town.

Lawrence himself had made such mistakes—and the reaction he now saw was no different from his previous experiences.

"Ah, no—it's no fault of yours, traveler," said one of the men, as if to ease the suddenly tense atmosphere. "There is a big church here, after all." The others nodded.

"Ours is a remote village," another added, "so things are a bit more complicated here. And 'tis true that we owe a great deal to the late Father Franz. But still..."

"Aye, but still! Come what may, we mustn't disobey Lord Truyeo."

"Lord Truyeo?"

"Ah, Lord Truyeo is the guardian spirit of this village. He brings us good harvests, helps our children grow up strong and healthy, and keeps evil spirits away. He's where the name Tereo comes from."

"Ah, I see," Lawrence murmured to himself. This no doubt explained the great snake in the room at Sem's house.

He gave vague agreements and looked at Holo, who despite the great clamor that her drinking had been the center of a moment ago, looked back at him.

The spirit right before his eyes was not one to take lightly, either.

"A spirit of good harvest, eh? As a traveling merchant, I've heard such things. Is this Lord Truyeo a wolf spirit?"

"A wolf? Ridiculous! As though such a devil's spirit would guard a village!"

It was quite a rebuke. Lawrence mused that he might be able to use this to tease Holo later.

“Ah, so he is—”

“A snake, merchant! Lord Truyeo is a snake!”

If one was careless, both poison fangs and wagon bed stowaways could be equally troublesome, so Lawrence didn’t see much difference between snakes and wolves. But snake spirits were quite common here in the northlands.

However, the Church held the snake as its sworn enemy. It was written in the scriptures that it was a snake that had caused man’s fall.

“I’ve heard legends of snake spirits,” said Lawrence. “One once descended from the mountains to the sea, and the path left behind it became a great river.”

“Oh, come now, you can’t put Lord Truyeo beside such things! They say he’s so long that the weather at his head is different from what’s at his tail and that he devours the moon for breakfast and the sun for dinner.”

“Aye, that’s right!” came a cacophony of voices.

“And besides, Lord Truyeo is nothing like those old fairy tales. After all, there’s a cave he dug to hibernate in not far outside of the village.”

“A hole?”

“Aye. One finds caverns everywhere, but this is one cave that bats and wolves dare not approach. There’s a story of a traveler that once went inside to prove his courage—he never returned. There’s a curse on anyone who enters—it has long been so. Even Father Franz told us never to enter. If you’d like to see it, it’s naught but a short walk from here.”

Lawrence feigned horror as he shook his head, but he now realized why the town’s church went unused.

As a matter of fact, it was something of a miracle that the church hadn't been razed to the ground.

But after Lawrence thought it over for a moment, he realized the reason why the church was still standing.

The town of Enberch was not so very far away.

"You passed through Enberch ere arriving here, did you not?"

Just as Lawrence wondered how to broach the topic, a villager did it for him.

"You saw the giant church there, then. A man named Bishop Van is in charge there, and every generation of bishop there has been a maddening presence," continued the villager.

"Enberch was once much smaller than Tereo, the story goes," said another. "They, too, were looked over by Lord Truyeo until one day missionaries from the Church came, and the whole village rolled over and converted without so much as a second thought. A cathedral went up in a flash, more people came, a road was laid, and soon it was a grand town. Then they started making demands of Tereo..."

"Aye," continued a third. "And of course, they wanted us to convert as well. But thanks to the efforts of the people here two generations ago, they managed to hold off conversion by letting a church be built. But there's no comparison between their grand town and our little village. They let us continue our devotion to Truyeo, but in exchange we pay heavy taxes. Ask any of our grandfathers; they'll complain about it all day."

There were stories all the time of deals like this being made on the front lines of missionary work.

"So it was about thirty or forty years ago that Father Franz arrived," said a villager.

Lawrence was beginning to understand the village's situation more

and more. “I see,” he said. “But I gather that a young lady by the name of Elsa now has charge of the church.”

“Ah, yes, indeed she does…”

Thanks to the ale, tongues were loosened all around.

Lawrence decided he would get answers to all of his questions in one fell swoop.

“When we stopped to pray for safe travels, I was quite surprised to find such a young girl wearing priestly robes. Are there special circumstances surrounding her, as I can’t help but assume?”

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” agreed a villager. “It was more than ten years ago that Father Franz took Miss Elsa in. She’s a good girl, but as a priest? Surely not.”

“If the responsibility becomes too heavy for her, would it not be possible to summon a priest from Enberch?” Lawrence asked.

“Ah, about that…,” said one man, who looked nervously at the fellow next to him, who in turn looked to his neighbor.

In the end, the gaze traveled fully around the table before the first man spoke again.

“You’re a merchant from a distant land, are you not?”

“Er, yes.”

“Well, then, perhaps—well, do you know any powerful men in the Church?”

Lawrence did not immediately understand why the man was asking, but he got the feeling that if he had known any, the man would have told him everything.

The man continued. “Someone that could really stick it to that lot in Enberch—”

“Hey!” Iima had appeared just a moment earlier. She rapped the man smartly on the head. “What are you saying to our guest? Do you want a beating from the elder?”

Lawrence almost laughed at the chastened man, who looked at the moment like a boy being scolded by his mother, but as he saw Iima’s gaze move to him, he quickly suppressed his smile.

“I’m sorry—it must look like we’re hiding something. But even a traveler—no, *especially* a traveler—can understand that every village has its own problems.”

Iima’s words carried weight, given her past spent traveling from village to village with a brewing jug on her back.

And in any case, Lawrence saw the truth in what she said.

“When travelers come through, we’d like them to eat our food and drink our wine, and when they visit another region, to talk about how nice the village was. That’s how I see it anyway.”

“I quite agree,” said Lawrence.

Iima grinned and slapped the village men on their backs. “Now then, you lot, your last job of the day is to drink and make merry!” she said, but suddenly her gaze flicked elsewhere. She then looked back at Lawrence and smiled apologetically. “I wish I could say the same to you, but it seems your companion has had quite enough.”

“She hasn’t had anything to drink in some time; I daresay she went a bit overboard.” There wasn’t much ale left in Lawrence’s own cup. He drained it in one go and stood. “I’ll return to the inn before she makes a spectacle of herself. At least she hasn’t married anyone yet.”

“Ha! She can take it from me, no good comes from a woman drinking!”

The men all chuckled furtively at Iima’s hearty comment. There seemed to be a number of stories about the subject.

“I’ll remember that,” said Lawrence, leaving some silver coins on the table.

It had cost him ten *trenni* to treat everyone in the tavern, which he’d done in order to quickly fit in.

Nobody wanted a spendthrift for a friend, but a generous traveler was welcome the world over.

Once Lawrence had collected Holo—who was sprawled out over a table, having seemingly drunk herself into a stupor—he left the bar, sent off with a mixture of friendly teasing and thanks.

It was fortune within misfortune that the tavern and inn both faced the town square.

Despite Holo’s slender frame, being a wolf spirit she could eat and drink tremendous amounts—extra weight that Lawrence now felt. Lifting her took effort.

Of course, that was only necessary if she truly had passed out from the liquor.

“You ate too much and drank too much.”

Lawrence put her arm around his neck, supporting her from the side. As soon as he spoke, she seemed to support her weight a bit on her own, lightening his burden.

Holo burped. “Wasn’t it my job to eat and drink, leaving barely a space for chatter?”

“Of course, I’m aware of that. But you kept on ordering the most expensive stuff.”

Though Holo’s eyes may have been sharper, Lawrence could hardly fail to notice the food and drink Holo had brought to her table.

“Ah, you’re a stingy male, you are. Ah, but enough of that—I need

to lie down. It's hard to breathe!"

Lawrence gave a brief sigh—it seemed Holo's unsteady footsteps were not an act after all—but he himself had had a bit to drink and wanted to sit down.

The village square of Tereo, dimly lit by the lamps hanging on a few of the buildings that faced it, was deserted.

Though it had been some time since sunset, the ways in which this village differed from a larger town were clear.

When they reached the inn and opened the door, the front room was illuminated only by a single apologetic candle. The master was not there—which was hardly surprising as he'd been drinking merrily away at the same table as Holo.

Noticing the return of her guests, the master's wife came out, taking one look at Holo's sad state and smiling sympathetically.

Lawrence asked for some water, then climbed the creaking stairs to their second-story room.

The inn seemed to have but four rooms in total, and at the moment, Lawrence and Holo were the only guests.

Despite this, apparently a good number of people came for the spring seed-sowing and autumn harvest festivals.

The only decoration in the inn was the embroidered cloth crest, which hung in the hall, left behind by a knight that had evidently passed through long ago.

If Lawrence remembered correctly, the crest—now illuminated by a shaft of moonlight that streamed in through the open window—was the symbol of a mercenary group famous in the northlands of Ploania for killing saints of the Church.

Lawrence didn't know if the innkeeper was ignorant of this or if he

displayed the crest *because* of its connotations.

Looking at the crest made it clear to Lawrence just what the relationship between the Church and the village of Tereo was like.

"Hey, we're nearly there. Don't fall asleep yet!" As they climbed the stairs, Holo's footing became less and less sure, and by the time they came to the door of their room, she seemed to be at her limit.

They entered, Lawrence guessing that she would be hungover again tomorrow, and he felt more sympathy than annoyance toward his companion as he managed to lay her down on the bed.

The room's window was closed, but a few slivers of moonlight found their way through the cracks. Lawrence opened the battered window and breathed out the hustle and bustle of the day, exchanging it for the solemnly cold winter air.

Shortly after, there was a knock at the door. He turned to see the innkeeper's wife enter, bringing water and some fruit he couldn't immediately identify.

He asked and she explained that it was good for hangovers—though unfortunately the one most in need of the cure had already fallen fast asleep. It wouldn't do to refuse her kindness, so he accepted the fruit gratefully.

The fruits were hard and round. Two fit in the palm of his hand. When Lawrence bit into one, the sourness was so intense it made his temples ache.

The fruits certainly seemed effective. There might even be business to be had with them. He made a mental note to look into such the next day, if there was time.

Lawrence thought back on the noisy evening at the tavern.

Holo's speed at blending into the tavern's mood was genuinely impressive.

Of course, he'd explained the goal to her ahead of time, as well as the part he wanted her to play.

When a pair of travelers stopped in a tavern, generally they had to either endure endless questions from the patrons or be left out of conversation entirely.

Avoiding these fates took money.

There was no easy way to obtain coin in a village like this with little in the way of commerce—but unless it was completely isolated, Tereo wouldn't be able to survive without at least *some* money.

This was the main reason travelers were so welcome. Without money, they would have no reason to entertain people whose backgrounds were completely unknown.

Next, the travelers had to eat and drink heartily.

They had no way of knowing the quality of food and drink the village tavern had to offer. In the worst case, a traveler could be poisoned, and even if he didn't die outright, he could be stripped bare and left in the mountains.

Which meant that eating and drinking indicated trust in the village.

It was important to be careful, but an interesting thing about the world is this: People tend not to be heartless if they feel they are trusted.

Lawrence had learned these things as he had opened new trade routes, but Holo's skill at fitting into the tavern's atmosphere was even better than his—and it was thanks to her that he was able to get answers to difficult questions much more easily than he'd anticipated.

Though Iima interrupted his last question, the visit had still gone well. If it had been a business visit, Lawrence would've been willing to give Holo some coin by way of thanks.

That said, it wasn't much fun to see her accomplish the task so effortlessly when he'd gotten along perfectly well on his own up until this point.

With age came experience, he supposed.

And yet.

Lawrence closed the window and sank into contemplation as he lay himself down on the bed.

Should Holo grasp the ways of business, it would clearly be the birth of a merchant with incredible prowess. With someone who could so adroitly penetrate social circles, Lawrence couldn't help but dream of the new trade routes he might open. Holo could certainly become such a trader.

Lawrence's dream was to have a shop of his own in a town somewhere. For the shop to prosper, it was clear to him that two people working would be better than one, and three was still better than two. It was only natural for him to think about how reassuring Holo's presence would be.

Holo's home of Yoitsu was not far, and its location wasn't entirely a mystery anymore.

Even if they were unable to discover the location of the abbey and even if they found no further clues, they would still probably find Yoitsu by the time summer came.

What did Holo plan to do after that?

Though it was only a verbal contract, he had promised to accompany her home.

Lawrence looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

He knew full well that parting was part and parcel of travel.

But it was not just Holo's talent that he would miss. When he thought of their constant verbal sparring, the notion that it would end with their travels together caused his chest to ache.

Having thought it through this far, Lawrence closed his eyes and smiled to himself there in the darkness.

No good would come of a merchant thinking of matters outside business.

That was another lesson he had learned in his seven years of experience on the road.

What he needed to worry about was the content of his coin purse.

What he should be thinking about was how to rein in Holo's constant gluttony.

The thoughts chased each other through Lawrence's mind until he finally began to feel sleepy.

No good would come of it.

No good at all.

The room's ragged blankets felt like they had been boiled in a pot, then dried in the sun. They were completely useless against the morning chill.

Lawrence was awakened by his own sneeze. A new day had begun.

At this hour, what little warmth could be found in the blanket was truly worth ten thousand gold pieces—not that he would be compensated for it.

Far from it—the warmth was like a devil child sent to devour his time. Lawrence rose and looked over at the bed next to him. Holo was already awake.

Her back was turned to him, and she looked down, as though busy with some task.

"Ho—"

He stopped in the middle of her name—her tail had suddenly fluffed out in a way he'd never seen before.

"Wh-what's wrong?" he managed.

Holo's ears pricked up, and at length she slowly turned around.

The sun had not yet fully risen, and the air was bluish. White puffs of her breath were visible as she looked over her shoulder.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and in her hand was a small round fruit out of which a bite had just been taken.

"...Ah, you ate it?" Lawrence asked, half-smiling.

Holo licked her lips and nodded. "Wh...what *is* this...?"

"The innkeeper's wife brought it after we came back to the inn last night. Apparently it's good for hangovers."

Evidently some of the fruit lingered in her mouth. Holo squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to swallow, then sniffed and wiped the corners of her eyes. "Eating this would drag me back to sobriety after a hundred years' drinking!"

"It certainly looks like you could use its help."

Holo frowned and threw what was left of the fruit at Lawrence, then tended to her still-fluffed tail. "'Tis not as though I am hungover *every* morning."

"And thank goodness for that. It's cold again today, I should say."

Lawrence looked at the fruit Holo had thrown at him. It was half gone. To have eaten half of the sour fruit's flesh in a single bite

without knowing what to expect—there was no wonder she'd found the taste a shock. While it was impressive she hadn't cried out, that might have been because she was simply unable to.

"I don't mind a bit of cold, but no one in the village is yet awake."

"Surely *someone* is up...but I daresay shops will not be open until late."

Lawrence stood up from the bed and opened the rickety window, which seemed like it would be little use against even a weak breeze. He looked out; there was nothing but wisps of morning mist in the village square.

Lawrence was used to seeing merchants jostle for space in town square markets. The contrast made this one seem quite lonely.

"I surely prefer a livelier place," said Holo.

"You'll find no argument from me there." Lawrence closed the window and looked over his shoulder to see Holo burrowing underneath the blankets to go back to sleep.

"You know, they say the gods made us to sleep just once a day."

"Oh? Well, I'm a wolf," Holo said with a yawn. "There's nothing for it if no one has yet risen. If I must be cold and hungry, I'd rather be asleep."

"Well, we *are* here in the wrong season. Still, it's odd."

"Oh?"

"Ah, it's nothing you'd care about. I just can't quite figure the sources of income for the people here."

Holo had initially popped her head out of the covers with interest, but at these words, she immediately retreated back within them.

Lawrence chuckled slightly at her actions, and having nothing

better to do, he thought the problem over.

Though it was true that this was a slow season for farmers, villages prosperous enough to cease work entirely during the winter were few and far between.

And based on what Lawrence heard in the tavern, they had to pay taxes to the town of Enberch.

Yet the villagers did not seem to be engaging in any jobs on the side.

The village was still very quiet just as Holo had said.

Side jobs for farming villages like this were things like spinning and weaving wool or making baskets and bags out of straw. Such work wasn't profitable unless the volume was high, so people were generally busy at work as soon as the sun was up. If taxes had to be paid, they would have to work that much harder.

What was even stranger was the excellent ale and food at the tavern the night before.

In truth, the village of Tereo seemed, somehow, to have money.

While Holo's nose for the quality of food was unmatched, Lawrence's sense of smell was attuned to money.

If he could learn something about the flow of coin in this village, he might be able to do some business here, he thought to himself.

In any case, there weren't any other merchants here, which by itself was a state Lawrence liked.

He couldn't help but grin at himself. Here he was on a journey that had nothing to do with business, yet his mind drifted there all the same.

Just then, from outside the window, came the sound of a door

creaking open.

The sound stood out clearly in the quiet morning. Lawrence looked through a crack in the window. It was none other than Evan.

But he was not entering the church as before—he was *leaving* it.

From his hand dangled a bundle of some kind, perhaps a meal.

As before, Evan looked around carefully, then trotted away from the church.

After he'd gone a slight distance, he turned and waved to Elsa. When Lawrence looked over at Elsa, he saw her smile and wave back in response—she couldn't have looked more different from when she had dealt with Lawrence.

Lawrence found himself feeling a bit envious.

He watched Evan recede into the distance.

I see, he thought to himself, finally realizing why Evan was angry over the dispute between the church Elsa managed and the one in Enberch.

But Lawrence was a merchant; his vision was hardly so narrow as to regard what he'd seen as nothing more than an amusing scene.

What his eyes captured was nothing less than an understanding of what people stood to gain.

"I know where we're going today."

"Mm?" Holo popped her head out from under the blankets, looking at Lawrence curiously.

"It's *your* home we're searching for, and yet why am I the one working so hard?"

Holo did not immediately answer, instead flicking her ears rapidly

as she sneezed and then rubbing her nose. "'Tis because I am *that* important, nay?"

Lawrence could only sigh at her shameless answer. "Would it kill you to spare me such talk from time to time?"

"You're such a merchant."

"Large profit requires large purchases. Nothing comes of buying small."

"Hmph. What about your small courage, eh?"

It was a good comeback; Lawrence had no response.

Lawrence closed his eyes, at which Holo chuckled and then continued. "It's harder for you to move when I am with you, is it not? This is a small village, and eyes follow us wherever we go."

Lawrence couldn't manage so much as an "oh."

"If I could take action, I would—but all I would do is go to that impudent girl at the church and tear her throat out. Please, go and find the location of the abbey, truly. I may seem lazy, but I want nothing more than to go there and hear what the monk has to say."

"Understood," said Lawrence to calm the flames of Holo's emotions, which burned like a sheaf of straw set ablaze.

Though she was sometimes utterly transparent with her feelings, other times she concealed her passions beneath a veil of apathy.

She was a troublesome companion, but nonetheless, her words were right on the mark. It was because she was important to Lawrence that he did all this.

"I'll be back by midday at the latest," said Lawrence.

"Bring me a souvenir," came Holo's muffled voice from beneath the blankets. Lawrence's only reply was his usual rueful grin.

He descended the stairs and greeted the pale-faced innkeeper as he walked by the counter, then headed around to the stable, taking a sack of wheat from his wagon's bed before going back outside.

Even without farmwork to do, people began to rise once the sun was up. Here and there were villagers tending to their vegetable patches or taking care of their pigs or chickens.

While yesterday he was greeted with only suspicion, a few people now looked at Lawrence with smiles. The night of revelry seemed to have had some effect.

A few others couldn't manage a smile, owing to their hangovers.

But in any case, it seemed he had been more or less accepted as a traveler, which came as a relief.

The increased recognition would make it harder to move, though.

Holo's impression had been correct. While Lawrence was impressed at her insight, he also felt a twinge of jealousy.

His destination, as he mulled such thoughts over, was naturally Evan's water mill, where he planned to ask about Elsa.

Lawrence was not Holo. As such, he had no intention of trying to discover the nature of Evan and Elsa's relationship.

But in order to win over the touchy, reclusive Elsa, it would be faster for Lawrence to speak with Evan, who seemed to have a better understanding of her circumstances.

As he walked down the path he had driven his wagon over the previous day, Lawrence nodded a greeting to a man who was plucking weeds from a field just outside the village.

Lawrence didn't have any memory of the man, but apparently he had been in the bar last night as he smiled and returned the greeting.

“On foot, eh? Where’re you headed?” the man asked. It was a reasonable question.

“I was thinking of having some wheat ground.”

“Oh, the mill, eh? Careful you don’t get cheated!”

It was probably a common joke when going to the miller’s to have wheat ground. Lawrence smiled by way of reply and continued on to the mill.

A merchant was hardly ever trusted by anyone, save another merchant. Yet there were occupations that were still worse off.

While Lawrence himself had no questions about the God of the Church, who claimed that all trades and occupations were equal, he remembered that the people of Tereo had no love for the servants of that God.

The world simply didn’t go as one might wish. It was filled with hardship.

With the harvest over, the wheat fields he passed as he walked the path between the hill and the stream were rather desolate, but soon the millhouse came into view.

Evan seemed to hear the merchant’s footsteps as he approached and popped his head out of the entrance. “Ah, Master Lawrence!”

He seemed cheerful as ever, though being called “master” after having met the lad only a day earlier irritated Lawrence.

Lawrence raised the sack of wheat and spoke. “Have you a mortar free at the moment?”

“Eh? I do, but…are you leaving already?”

Lawrence handed the sack over to Evan, shaking his head.

It was reasonable to assume that if a traveler was having his wheat

ground, he was making preparations to leave.

"No, I'll be in Tereo for a time yet," said Lawrence.

"Ah, you must! Just wait a moment, then. I'll grind this into flour that will rise beautifully, you'll see."

It occurred to Lawrence that Evan might be trying to butter him up in order to win a chance at leaving the village. Evan seemed to give a short sigh of relief as he went back into the millhouse.

Lawrence followed him in and was immediately surprised.

Despite its dingy exterior, the inside of the mill was clean and well kept with three grand millstones.

"This is quite a mill," said Lawrence.

"Isn't it? It may not look like much on the outside, but I grind all the wheat in Tereo," said Evan proudly as he connected the shaft that turned the mortar wheel to the shaft coming from the waterwheel.

He then extended a thin pole out the window, undoing the rope that prevented the waterwheel from turning.

Immediately the wheel creaked to life, moving the stone with a deep rumbling sound.

Checking that everything was moving as it should, Evan poured Lawrence's wheat into a hole at the top of the mortar.

Now all they had to do was wait for the flour to collect at the plate underneath the stone.

"I haven't seen wheat in quite some time. We'll weigh it out later, but my guess is that the fee will be maybe three *ryut*," said Evan.

"That's quite cheap."

"Cheap? And here I was worried you'd find it too high."

In places with heavy taxes, Lawrence wouldn't have been surprised at Evan's figure being tripled.

But perhaps three *ryut* seemed high to someone unfamiliar with the market.

"The villagers are a tightfisted lot when it comes to grinding. But if I don't collect in full, I'm the one to bear the elder's ire."

Lawrence laughed. "That's true no matter where you go."

"Were you a miller, too, once?"

"No, but I once did work as a tax collector. It was for the butcher tax on meat. Things like how much tax they owed for slaughtering one pig, you see."

"Huh, so that is how it's done, eh?"

"Cleaning meat and bones taints the river and creates a lot of garbage, so it's taxed in order to pay for the cleanup—but of course nobody wants to pay."

Taxation rights were auctioned off to the highest bidder by town officials. The bid went directly into the town's coffers, and the winner could then go collect taxes at will. The more tax one could collect, the greater the profit—but if the tax collector wasn't successful, he risked great loss.

Lawrence had done this twice when he was starting out as a merchant.

The effort collecting took and the money it yielded were totally out of proportion, he found.

"In the end, I would have to cry and beg to get people to pay. It was awful," he said.

Evan laughed. "I surely understand!"

Lawrence knew that this story of shared hardship would go far toward winning Evan's trust.

Well, now, he thought to himself as he laughed with Evan.

"Incidentally, you did say that all of Tereo's grain is ground here, yes?"

"Yes, it's true. There was a big harvest this year, so it's hardly my fault it took so long to grind, yet they yell at me constantly!"

Lawrence couldn't help but imagine Evan staying up all night, tending the mortar.

But Evan laughed at the memory of it, apparently happy, then continued. "What, then—have you changed your mind since yesterday? Are you planning to do wheat business in Tereo?"

"Hm? Oh well, depending on circumstances..."

"I'd counsel you to give it up," said Evan flatly.

"Merchants are particularly bad at giving up."

"Ha, spoken like a true merchant! But you need only go to the elder to understand. It's been decided that the village must sell all its grain to Enberch." As he spoke, Evan checked the progress of the mortar, carefully brushing the flour into the stone plate with a boar hair brush.

"Ah, is Tereo part of Enberch's fief, then?" If that was true, it would make the leisurely lives of the villagers even harder to explain.

Unsurprisingly, Evan looked up and spoke proudly. "We're their equals. They buy our wheat; we buy other things from them. What's more, when we buy wine or clothing from Enberch, we pay no taxes. Impressive, isn't it?"

When he passed through Enberch, Lawrence had seen that it was a

town of some size.

The term *poor* might have been too harsh for Tereo, but the village certainly didn't seem up to the task of confronting Enberch.

It was impressive indeed, then, for such a small village to conduct commerce with such favorable terms.

"What I heard at the tavern was that Enberch levies heavy taxes on Tereo, though."

Evan chuckled. "That's ancient history. Want to know why?" He folded his arms like a boastful child. It was more amusing than irritating.

"I'd love to," said Lawrence, opening his palms in invitation.

Evan suddenly unfolded his arms and ducked his head. "Uh, sorry. I don't know myself," he said bashfully. "B-but still—," he hastened to add. "I know who's responsible for making it this way!"

In that instant, Lawrence felt something he'd not felt in a long time —the pleasure of being one step ahead of another. "Father Franz, wasn't it?"

"Ah! Er—how did you know?"

"Call it merchant's intuition."

Holo would no doubt have grinned unpleasantly at him if she had been there, but sometimes Lawrence wanted to have a bit of fun. Since meeting Holo, he had always been on the receiving end of her teasing. It had been some time since he'd had the opportunity to dish it out.

"A-amazing. You're a man to be reckoned with, Mr. Lawrence."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. Is my wheat done?"

"Oh, er—yes. Just a moment."

Lawrence smiled slightly at Evan's haste, then sighed to himself.

It could be dangerous to stay in Tereo for too long.

He had seen from time to time places like this village and its neighbor Enberch.

"Ah, yes. It will indeed be three *ryut*. But since there's nobody here, if you'll keep mum about it, you don't have to—"

"No, I'll pay. A miller's got to be honest, don't you think?"

Evan held a measuring container with the newly ground wheat flour in it. He smiled helplessly and accepted the three blackened silver coins Lawrence offered. "Make sure you sift it well before you make bread with it," he said.

"I shall. By the way—," began Lawrence. Evan had already begun tending to the mortar now that its work was finished. "Do the church services here always begin so early?"

Lawrence expected surprise from Evan, but the boy was only curious as he turned around. "Hm?" He then seemed to understand the implication behind the question and smiled. "No, hardly. It's not bad in the summer, but I'm sure you'll agree it's far too cold to sleep in the millhouse in the winter. I sleep in the church."

Lawrence had already inferred as much, so it was easy for him to affect a natural "Ah, I see." He continued. "Still, you seem to be quite close to Miss Elsa."

"Hm? Ah, well, ha-ha-ha..."

If you mix pride, happiness, and embarrassment, add a bit of water, and knead until soft, you would wind up with something like Evan's expression at that moment.

Such a recipe would certainly rise well when baked in the fires of jealousy.

“When we visited the church yesterday to ask for directions, we were treated with no small amount of disdain. She simply wouldn’t listen to anything I said. Yet this morning, she seemed as kind and gentle as the Holy Mother. Quite a surprise.”

Evan laughed nervously. “Well, Elsa’s quite short-tempered for someone as timid as she is. Her shyness makes her like a wild rat when she first meets someone. If she really wants to follow in Father Franz’s footsteps, she’ll have to stop.” He disconnected the waterwheel from the mortar and adroitly refastened the rigging to the waterwheel.

His smooth, competent movements combined with the words he spoke made Evan seem older than his years.

“But still,” he continued, “it’s been some time since she’s been in such high spirits. I suppose your timing was bad. By yesterday evening, she was quite happy. Still…it’s odd. Why didn’t she mention you had visited? That girl usually tells me how many sneezes she’s had that day.”

While Lawrence knew that Evan was only making idle conversation, he really had no interest in this.

But if he wanted to get closer to Elsa, he needed to get Evan on board.

“Surely it’s because in the end, I’m also a man,” he said.

Evan was stunned silent for a moment, then burst out laughing. Finally he managed, “So she was worried I would get the wrong idea! That silly girl!”

Lawrence looked at Evan and realized that he had much to learn from the lad despite his younger age.

Problems of this sort were more complicated even than business.

“But what would’ve made her so cheerful after being so irritable?”

Evan's face darkened. "Why do you ask?"

"My own companion's moods change more often than the mountain weather," said Lawrence with a shrug.

Evan paused, recalling Holo from his memory. He ultimately seemed to accept Lawrence's statement.

He flashed a sympathetic smile. "It must be quite rough going."

"It surely is."

"Sadly I don't know how much I can explain. It's simply that in Elsa's case, a persistent problem has calmed down."

"Meaning?"

"Well—," Evan began but then cut himself off. "I was told not to talk about it to people from outside the village. If you simply must know, perhaps you might ask the elder..."

"Ah, no, if you can't talk about it, that's fine."

Lawrence withdrew easily, but of course, there was a reason for that as well.

He had already gathered more than enough information.

But Evan seemed now to be worried he'd somehow aggrieved Lawrence. His face was suddenly apprehensive. He cast about for something to say. "Ah, but—I can say that if you go now, she'll probably talk to you. She's really not a bad person!"

Given that even the village elder had pretended ignorance of the abbey, Lawrence doubted the problem would be so simple. But it would a good opportunity to go and talk to Elsa once more.

In any case, he now had a plan.

Assuming his predictions were correct, it would work.

“Well then,” he said. “I suppose I’ll go talk with her again.”

“I think you should.”

Deciding that there was nothing further to be gained here, Lawrence said, “I’ll be off, then,” and turned to leave.

“U-um, Mr. Lawrence!” Evan called out hastily.

“Hm?”

“Is…is it hard being a traveling merchant?”

Deep in Evan’s uneasy eyes there was a determination.

Lawrence could not bring himself to snicker at the boy. “There’s no job in the world that’s not hard. But…yes, it’s quite nice at the moment.”

Lawrence admitted to himself that it was nice in a completely different way since he’d met Holo.

“I see…I guess you’re right. Well, thank you!”

Though being a miller required honesty, there was a difference between honesty and artlessness.

If Evan became a merchant, he would probably be quite popular, but actually turning a profit would take hard work, Lawrence knew.

Naturally he said none of this, simply raising the leather sack of freshly ground flour by way of thanks as he left the mill.

He ambled up the path that ran by the stream, deep in thought.

Evan claimed that Elsa would tell him even the number of sneezes she’d had in a day. The statement had left a strangely deep impression on Lawrence.

He could imagine Holo reporting the number of sighs she’d

breathed in a day to convey her countless hardships and grudges.

What was the difference?

Then again, a stoic and lovable Holo would be downright eerie. Since she herself was not present, Lawrence couldn't help but laugh at the very idea.

Upon returning to the village square, Lawrence saw a few stands now open—not enough to be called a proper marketplace, but there were more than a few villagers gathered.

Yet it seemed that the gathering was less about purchasing things and more about making affable small talk as the day began. There was none of the tense atmosphere that came with people straining to buy as cheaply as possible and selling as dearly as they could.

To hear Evan tell it, Enberch purchased all of Tereo's wheat at a fixed price, and the people of Tereo could buy Enberch's goods tax free.

It was hard to believe, but if that was true, it would explain the leisurely lives that Tereo's citizens seemed to lead.

Villages were often subordinate to nearby towns, the villagers themselves trapped by the need to work day in and day out simply to afford the wine, food, clothing, and livestock that was necessary for everyday life, but that they were unable to produce themselves.

Such a village would sell its crops to a town and use the money to purchase what the villagers needed.

But in order to buy the various goods that had been brought to the town, they needed coin. The only way to raise cash was to sell their wheat to the town merchants, converting it to money, then to use the funds to buy goods from those same merchants.

The issue was that while the villagers needed money, the town merchants did not necessarily need the village's wheat.

The power imbalance meant that the town could force the villagers to sell cheaply, then set the prices of their own goods high with things like tariffs.

The more dire a village's financial situation, the more easily a town could take advantage of it.

Eventually the villagers would be forced to borrow money, and with no hope of repaying it, they would effectively become slaves, forced to send all their produce to the town.

To a traveling merchant like Lawrence, such slave towns represented excellent opportunities. Coin wielded terrible power in such places, and all sorts of goods could be bought for absurdly low prices.

But naturally, once a village had secured a source of money, it would be able to again resist the town's influence, putting the town in a bad place. At that point, the arguments would become constant, endlessly repeated over this or that privilege—yet Tereo seemed free from any such fighting.

While he didn't know how Tereo had avoided such a situation, Lawrence did have a sense of the problems and risks it faced as a result.

After buying some dried figs at a stand with a master who seemed to think that merely being open was enough, Lawrence returned to the inn.

When he got there, Holo was asleep on the bed, entirely free from the cares of the world. Lawrence laughed soundlessly.

She opened her eyes eventually as Lawrence rustled about in the room. Once her face finally emerged from underneath the blankets, the first word out of her mouth was "Food."

Since he hadn't been certain how long it would take them to get this far, Lawrence had been extremely thrifty with their provisions while

they traveled. He decided they should finish off these first.

"There was this much cheese left? I only restrained myself because you said it wouldn't last," said Holo.

"Who said you could eat all of it? Half of that is mine."

As soon as he picked up the cheese and cut it in half with a knife, Holo glared at him, her grudge obvious. "Did you not make a tidy profit in the last town?"

"Did I not explain to you that we've used it all already?"

In point of fact, he'd paid off his remaining liabilities in Kumersun as well as a town nearby in one fell swoop.

He did this partially as a precaution against their search for Yoitsu taking too much time—which could cause him to miss a payment deadline—and also because carrying too much cash was simply foolhardy.

Some money still remained after that, which he'd left with a trading company. A company's power lay in its cash reserves. Of course, Lawrence was earning interest on that balance, but Holo didn't need to know that.

"You only need to tell me once—I understand that. What I mean is, *you* made money, but *I* received nothing."

It pained Lawrence to hear this.

The business in Kumersun got out of hand because of Lawrence's misunderstanding, but Holo had received nothing for her trouble.

However, if he showed weakness now, the wolf's grip would only tighten.

"How can you say something so shameless after eating and drinking so much?"

“In that case, shall we do a careful comparison of the coin you made and how much I’ve cost?”

Hit where it hurt, Lawrence looked away.

“You made quite a tidy sum with the rocks I bought from that bird woman, you did. Not to mention—”

“Fine, fine!”

With her ears able to discern any lie, Holo was worse than any tax collector.

If Lawrence struggled any further, it would only deepen the wound.

He gave up, thrusting the entirety of the cheese at Holo.

She chuckled. “Why, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was surely rare to be thanked yet to remain as annoyed as Lawrence was.

“Ah, so are your inquiries proceeding?” asked Holo.

“More or less.”

“More or less? So you’ve found half the directions we need?”

Lawrence smiled. What he’d said could be interpreted that way, he had to admit. He thought for a moment, then replied, “If I’d gone to the church, I thought I’d get the same cold shoulder we got yesterday. So I went to see Evan at the millhouse.”

“Ah, going after the person whose relationship with the girl is not uncomplicated. ’Tis wiser than I’d expect from you.”

“...Yes, well.” Lawrence cleared his throat and got to the point. “Would you give up going to the abbey?”

Holo froze. "...And the reason would be?"

"There's something strange about this village. It feels dangerous to me."

Holo was expressionless. She chewed a piece of rye bread on which she'd spread some cheese. "So you're not willing to risk danger to look for my home, then?"

So that's how it's going to be, Lawrence thought, clenching his jaw. "That's not—wait, you're doing that on purpose."

"Hmph." Holo chewed the piece of bread rapidly, swallowing it in the blink of an eye.

It was hard to know how many words she'd swallowed along with the bread, but her face made her displeasure clear enough.

Lawrence essentially understood her desire to reach the abbey and ask her questions as quickly as she could, but perhaps those desires were stronger than he realized.

But what little information he'd gathered in the village, along with the experience he had accrued as a merchant who had seen many other towns and villages, led him to believe that it would be dangerous to keep searching for the abbey's location while in Tereo.

After all—

"If I'm right, I think the abbey we're looking for *is* Tereo's church."

There was no change in Holo's expression, save for the tufts of her ears standing up bottlebrush straight.

"I'm going to go through my reasoning point by point. Are you ready?"

Holo fingered an ear tuft, then nodded slightly.

"First, Elsa obviously knows where the abbey is but is pretending

ignorance. If she's hiding that information, it means that for whatever reason, she can't talk about Church affairs. Also, when I went to the elder's house yesterday asking the same question, he also seemed to know—and also pretended not to."

Holo closed her eyes and nodded.

"Next, of all the buildings in the village, only the village elder's house is grander than the church. Yet if you'll think back to the conversations in the tavern yesterday, you'll see that the Church doesn't command much respect here. The villagers worship the local snake spirit that's protected them for ages—not the God of the Church."

"Still," said Holo, "did they not speak of Father Franz as someone who'd done the village good?"

"They did. The elder said the same thing. So it's clear that Father Franz did *something* to benefit the village—but it wasn't saving them by preaching the word of God, which means he did something that materially benefited them. And I found out what that was just a while ago, talking to Evan."

Holo was prodding a piece of bread with her finger. She cocked her head.

"Essentially, he created a contract between Tereo and Enberch that is disproportionately favorable to Tereo. That's why everybody in the village can be so idle now that the wheat harvest is over. They don't have any financial worries. And it was none other than Father Franz who made their lives what they are by negotiating a frankly unbelievably favorable contract with Enberch."

"Mm."

"So the dispute between Tereo and the Church in Enberch that Evan mentioned when we were first coming into town must be about this. Generally, internal Church disputes happen over who will take over vacated priesthood or bishop posts, trouble with the donation of

lands, or arguments over religious doctrine. At first I assumed that the trouble was over Elsa—being so young and a woman—taking charge of the church. But even if that's the reason on the face of it, the true cause is something else."

Elsa wished above all else to inherit Father Franz's position, a man in traveling clothes had appeared at the elder's house while Lawrence was visiting, and Evan said that Elsa's troubles had lifted the previous day.

Based on the map of relationships that Lawrence knew all too well, he came to understand the situation quickly.

"Enberch would want to destroy the relationship that currently exists between itself and Tereo. I don't know how or when Father Franz managed to execute the contract, but I'm sure that Enberch wants it as dead as Father Franz is now. The fastest way would be by sheer force of arms, but unfortunately Tereo also has a church. We can assume that the reason Enberch didn't resort to force long ago is because Tereo's church has supporters. So what to do? They need the village's church to disappear."

The messenger that had arrived at the elder's house the previous day might have brought a document from some distant church that recognized Elsa as Father Franz's successor or a letter from some nobleman promising support.

Either way, it was clear that something had secured Elsa's position.

"The villagers here make no secret that they worship a pagan spirit. If it was to be recognized as a pagan village proper, Enberch would have the excuse it needs to attack."

"If it was so simple as knowing how to get to the abbey, there'd be no need to lie about it," said Holo. "But if the abbey is *in* the village, they must hide it."

Lawrence nodded and made his suggestion again. "So can we not abandon this? Given the situation, the abbey's existence would be a

perfect excuse for Enberch to attack, which means the people of Tereo will continue to hide it from us. And if, as I suspect, the abbey *is* the church, then the monk we've been looking for is Father Franz. His knowledge of the old pagan tales may have been buried with him. There's no point in stirring up trouble when there's nothing to be gained from it."

Additionally, Lawrence and Holo had no way of proving they were unconnected to Enberch.

Most theologians were unwilling to accept the statement "I am not a demon" as proof that one was not, in fact, a demon.

"What's more, this involves pagan spirits. If this goes badly, we could be branded as heretics, and we would be in *real* trouble."

Holo sighed, scratching at the base of her ears. It seemed like she was having difficulty reaching the place that itched.

She appeared to understand that the situation facing them was grave, but she was unwilling to give up so easily.

Lawrence cleared his throat and tried again. "I understand that you want to gather information about your home, but I think there's danger here that we should avoid. As far as the location of Yoitsu goes, the information we gathered in Kumersun should be more than enough. And it's not as though you've lost your memory. We won't have to go far to—"

"Listen, you—," Holo interrupted suddenly, then snapped her mouth shut as if she'd forgotten what to say.

"Holo, hear me out."

Hearing Lawrence call her name, Holo's lip twisted slightly.

"So I don't misunderstand again, I want you to tell me clearly. Just what are you hoping to learn from these pagan tales?"

Holo looked away.

Lawrence didn't want his questions to sound like an interrogation, so he carefully modulated his tone as he spoke. "Do you want to know more about the bear spirit that…er, destroyed your home?"

Still looking askance, Holo did not respond.

"Or is it…something to do with your friends?"

These were the only possibilities Lawrence could think of.

For Holo to be so stubborn, it had to be one of those two things.

Maybe it was both.

"And if it is, what would you do?" Holo's eyes were piercing and cold.

They were not the eyes of the proud wolf stalking its prey.

They were the eyes of a cornered animal that would attack all who dared approach.

Lawrence chose his words carefully. They came to him with surprising speed.

"Depending on circumstances, there are some risks I will take."

In other words, the potential gain had to balance out the risk.

If Holo truly needed information about the hated bear spirit that had destroyed her home or about the fates of her old friends, Lawrence would not be unwilling to help.

Despite her youthful appearance, Holo was no child, and Lawrence expected that she could evaluate her own emotions and make logical decisions. If she did so and still asked for Lawrence's help, he was prepared to respect her decision and to take the risks that she asked.

Holo suddenly relaxed her tensed shoulders and uncrossed her legs. “Fine, then.” She continued. “It is fine. You hardly need prepare yourself for an outburst from me.”

Of course, Lawrence knew better than to take Holo’s words at their face value.

“Hark now—given my way, I would want to slap that insolent girl in the face and make her tell me everything, given what you’ve said. Also, I simply wish to know all I can about Yoitsu. Would you not likewise want to hear tell of your home?”

Lawrence nodded his agreement. Holo returned his nod, looking satisfied.

“However, I find the idea of you risking danger for my sake a bit troubling. We have a fair notion of where Yoitsu lies, do we not?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Then we need not risk this.”

Despite Holo’s statement, Lawrence remained uneasy.

While he had been the one that suggested abandoning their inquiries, he was willing to support her decision.

Hearing her accede so readily made him wonder if she was lying.

He said nothing as he thought about this. Holo sat on the edge of the bed, placing her feet on the floor.

“Why do you suppose I do not speak of my hometown to you?” she asked.

Lawrence couldn’t help showing his surprise at the question.

Holo smiled faintly, though it did not seem as if she was making fun of him. “Now and again I remember things about my hometown, things I wish to boast of. Memories I wish to tell you. But I do not,

because you are always so considerate—as you are being just now. I know that to complain that you are too kind is the height of selfishness. But it *is* a bit difficult for me." As she spoke, she plucked at the fur of her tail. "Honestly, if you were simply a more perceptive male, I would not have to say such embarrassing things."

"I'm...I'm sorry."

Holo giggled. "Still, being softhearted is one of your few good points...It's just a bit frightening for me."

She stood up from the bed, turning her back to Lawrence.

Her tail, thick with its winter fur, swept back and forth quietly. She hugged herself, arms around her shoulders, then looked back at Lawrence. "Here I am, lonely and helpless, yet you do not leap to devour me. Truly you are a frightening male."

Lawrence shrugged slightly under Holo's gaze, which seemed to challenge him. "One must be careful. Some fruits are more sour than they look."

Holo's arms dropped to her sides, and she turned back around to face Lawrence, smiling. "Ah, 'tis true, they can be unbearably sour. But," she said, slowly approaching him, her smile unwavering, "are you saying I'm not sweet?"

What's sweet about someone who does things like this? Lawrence thought to himself. He nodded immediately, as if to say, "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"Oh, ho, you've some nerve." Holo grinned.

"Some things need to be bitter to be tasty—ale, say," Lawrence quickly added.

Holo's eyes widened in apparent surprise before she quickly closed them, as if she'd slipped up and made a mistake. Her tail wagged as she said, "Hmph. Children shouldn't drink liquor."

“Oh, indeed—we can’t have them getting hungover.”

Holo pouted intentionally and thumped her fist against Lawrence’s chest.

Leaving her hand there, she lowered her gaze.

It felt somehow like they were acting in some kind of silly play.

Lawrence took her hand gently. “Will you really give this up?” he asked slowly.

Anyone with a mind as keen as Holo’s would have already quickly separated what was reasonable from what was not.

But just as the spirits could not be understood through reason alone, emotions were not easily controlled.

It was several moments before Holo replied.

“Asking me in such a way…is hardly fair,” she said quietly, gripping Lawrence’s shirt. “If I can learn anything about Yoitsu, my friends, or that awful bear spirit, then I want to know it. What we learned from the bird woman in Kumersun was far from enough. It was like feeling thirst yet having but a few drops of water to quench it,” murmured Holo weakly.

Being very careful now that he had understood the true nature of this conversation, Lawrence replied, “What do you want to do?”

Holo nodded once. “Might I…ask this of you?”

Her words gave off the sense that if he was to embrace her, her body would be soft and yielding.

Lawrence took a deep breath and replied, “Leave it to me.”

Holo was still looking down. Her tail wagged a single time.

Though he was not sure how much of her current state was

genuine, it was still enough to make him think the risk was worth the potential gain. He couldn't help wondering if he was drunk.

Suddenly Holo looked up to reveal a dauntless smile. "Actually, I've got an idea."

"Oh? Do tell."

"Well, about that..."

Holo laid out her plan; it was simple and clear. Lawrence sighed softly. "Are you serious?"

"We won't get anywhere being circumspect. And did I not just now ask if I could ask this of you? Did I not just ask if you would take a risk for me?"

"Still—"

Holo grinned, baring her fangs slightly. "'Leave it to me,' you said. It made me very happy."

Written contracts were composed with detailed descriptions so there was no room for interpretation.

But verbal contracts were dangerous because not only could there be arguments over what had or had not been said, but also it was hard to tell whether or not one had left room for interpretation.

Not to mention that Lawrence's opponent here was a centuries-old, self-proclaimed wisewolf.

He had utterly let his guard down, all along believing that he held the initiative.

"I have to grab your reins every once in a while, after all," said Holo, amused.

He had only answered so gallantly because it seemed like she was depending on him.

Lawrence felt pathetic for having even dreamed such a situation existed.

“Of course, if it doesn’t go well, I’ll leave things to you. So—,” she said, smoothly taking his hand. “Right now I wish only to grab your hand.”

Lawrence slumped.

He couldn’t have brushed her hand away even if he’d wanted to.

“Right, then! Let us eat and go forth!”

Lawrence’s reply was brief but entirely unambiguous.

CHAPTER THREE



Chapter Three

In truth, if Father Franz had also been Louis Lana Schtinghilt, the abbot that Lawrence and Holo were seeking, then there was a good possibility that volumes and papers containing stories of the pagan gods were still in the church.

Naturally, if the situation was as Lawrence surmised, it was likely that Elsa would not take even the slightest risk and would disclose nothing about the abbey.

But the more important something was, the more likely it had been recorded, and the harder someone worked on something, the more difficult it would be to simply burn that work to ash.

In all likelihood, the documentation of the pagan gods remained within the church.

The problem was getting to this work.

"Pardon, is anyone there?" Just like they had the previous day, Lawrence and Holo called at the church's front door.

However, unlike the previous day, they had not come unprepared.

"...What business have you?"

It had been but a day, so Lawrence did not know whether Elsa would be willing to open the door, but that at least seemed not to be a problem.

Yesterday she had been palpably irritated. Today her face was dark and cloudy with displeasure.

Seeing how much Elsa seemed to hate them, Lawrence found himself paradoxically fond of her.

Lawrence gave an easy smile. “My apologies for yesterday. I heard from Mr. Evan that you’ve been facing a difficult situation.”

She seemed to perk up a bit at the mention of Evan’s name, glancing through the only slightly open door at Lawrence, then Holo, then the travel-ready wagon behind them before looking back at Lawrence.

He noticed that the displeasure on her face had lessened.

“...I gather you’ve come to ask about the abbey again?”

“No, no. As far as that goes, I’ve already inquired with the elder, who also said he knew nothing of it. It is possible that the information I got in Kumersun was mistaken. The source was a bit eccentric, truth be told.”

“I see.”

Though Elsa may have thought she had succeeded in her deception, a merchant’s eyes were keener than that.

“Thus, though it be a bit earlier than we expected, we’ll be moving on to the next town. As such, we’ve come to pray for safe travels.”

“...If that is the case...” Though she seemed suspicious yet, Elsa slowly opened the door. “Come in,” she said, inviting them to enter.

The door closed with a thud once Holo followed Lawrence into the church. They were both dressed in traveling clothes with Lawrence even carrying a knapsack over his shoulder.

Having entered the church from the front, they found themselves in a hallway that extended from the left to the right. Across the hallway was another door. Church construction was the same no matter where one traveled, which meant that the door directly ahead

of them was the sanctuary. To the left would be the priestly offices or study with the residence to the right.

Elsa pulled up her cassock and walked around the two, opening the door to the sanctuary. “This way, please.”

Upon entering, Holo and Lawrence found the sanctuary to have considerable grandeur.

At the front stood an altar and an image of the Holy Mother with light shining down from windows installed at the level of the second floor.

The high ceiling and lack of any chairs added to the feeling of spaciousness.

The stones of the floor were tightly joined. Even the greediest merchant would have had trouble prying them free to sell off.

The floor leading from the sanctuary door to the altar was slightly discolored from the feet that had treaded that path so often.

Lawrence followed Elsa as they made their way in and saw that the floor directly in front of the altar had been slightly worn down.

“Father Franz—,” Lawrence started.

“Hm?”

“He must have been a man of great faith.”

Elsa was momentarily surprised, but then she noticed where Lawrence was looking.

“Ah…yes, you’re right. I’d…I’d never noticed until you pointed it out.”

This was the first smile from Elsa that Lawrence had ever seen, and though it was small, it had a tenderness to it that seemed to suit a girl of the Church.

It struck Lawrence all the more, given how severe she had been at their first meeting.

The fact that he would soon cause that smile to disappear filled him with regret, as though he was extinguishing a flame that had been difficult to light.

“Then let us pray. Are you prepared?”

“Ah, before we start,” said Lawrence, putting down his knapsack, removing his coat, and taking a step toward Elsa. “I must give my confession.”

The unexpected request gave Elsa pause, but after a moment, she answered, “Er, well, in that case, there’s another room—”

“No, I will give it here, before God.”

Lawrence was adamant as he approached Elsa, and she did not quail, merely nodding. “Very well,” she said with a quiet incline of her head, every inch the devout priest.

It seemed that Elsa’s desire to inherit Father Franz’s position was not solely for the village’s benefit.

She saw Holo quietly retreat to the rear of the sanctuary, and then putting her hands together and bowing her head, she recited a prayer.

When she lifted her face again, she was a loyal servant of God.

“Confess your sins, for God is always forgiving to those who are honest.”

Lawrence took a deep breath. He was just as likely to mock God as he was to pray, but here in the middle of the sanctuary, he couldn’t help but feel a certain trepidation.

He exhaled slowly, then knelt down on the floor. “I have told a lie.”

“What kind of lie?”

“I have been deceptive for my own gain.”

“You have confessed your sin before God. Now have you the courage to tell the truth?”

Lawrence raised his head. “I have.”

“Though God knows all, he still wishes to hear you speak your transgressions. Do not be afraid. God is always merciful to those whose faith is good.”

Lawrence closed his eyes. “I lied today.”

“In what way?”

“I tricked someone using a false pretense.”

Elsa paused for a moment, then spoke. “For what reason?”

“There was something I had to know, and in order to learn it, I lied to get close to the source of that knowledge.”

“...To whom did you lie...?”

Lawrence looked up and answered, “To you, Miss Elsa.”

She was obviously stunned.

“I have now confessed my lie before God, and I have told the truth.” Lawrence stood. He was a full head taller than Elsa. “I am seeking Diendran Abbey, and I have come to ask you its location.”

Elsa bit her lip. Though her eyes were filled with hatred, she lacked the resolve of their first encounter, the strength to turn away any request.

There was a reason Lawrence had delivered his confession here.

He had to trap Elsa, whose faith was plainly deep, here—here before God.

“No,” Lawrence corrected himself. “I have lied again. I have not come here to ask the location.”

Confusion spread over Elsa’s face like oil over water.

“I have come to ask whether this *is* Diendran Abbey.”

“…!”

Elsa backed away, but the depression caused by Father Franz’s years of devotion caused her to stumble.

She stood before God.

Here, of all places, she could not lie.

“Miss Elsa, this is Diendran Abbey, and Father Franz was also Louis Lana Schtinghilt. Do I not speak the truth?”

On the verge of tears, Elsa looked away, as though she childishly believed that as long as she did not shake her head, her response was not a lie.

But her reaction was as good as a confirmation.

“Miss Elsa, we simply wish to know the contents of the pagan tales that Father Franz collected. It is not for business and certainly has nothing to do with Enberch.”

Elsa gave a short gasp, then snapped her mouth shut so as not to let anything escape.

“Am I wrong in thinking that the reason you wish to keep the fact that this is Diendran Abbey a secret is because Father Franz’s collected records are here?”

A drop of sweat trickled down slowly from Elsa’s temple.

It was as good as an admission.

Lawrence casually closed his fist, signaling Holo.

"What you're worried about, Miss Elsa, is Enberch learning of Father Franz's activities, correct? All we want is to see his writings. We want to see them badly enough that we're willing to employ these upsetting methods."

Elsa opened her mouth almost involuntarily. "Wh-who...who *are* you?"

Lawrence did not answer immediately, simply looking at Elsa.

Elsa, who planned to bear the burdens of the church upon her slender frame, looked back at him uncertainly.

And then—

"Who are we? That is a question to which it is difficult to give a satisfying answer," interjected Holo.

Elsa suddenly looked over at Holo, as if only just realizing that she was present.

"There is a reason, though, why we—no, why *I* am forcing this issue."

"...What...what reason?" managed Elsa, her voice choked as she seemed on the verge of breaking into tears.

Holo nodded. "This reason."

Proving that they were not lackeys sent from Enberch was as difficult as trying to prove they were not demons.

But just as an angel might show its wings to prove that it was, at least, not a demon, there was a way for Holo and Lawrence to prove that whoever they were, they were not from Enberch.

Holo pulled her hood off, revealing her ears and tail.

“They are quite real. Would you care to touch them?”

Elsa’s head drooped forward. For a moment, Lawrence thought she was nodding, her hands clutched to her heart.

“Ugh—”

But then with a strange groan, Elsa fainted dead away.

After placing Elsa on the simple bed, Lawrence sighed.

He had thought that being moderately threatening would be effective, but evidently they’d gone too far.

Elsa had fainted but would probably awaken soon.

Lawrence found his eyes wandering around the room.

Though the Church certainly extolled the virtues of frugality, this room was so bare and empty that Lawrence found himself wondering if Elsa truly lived in it.

Turning right upon entering the church led to a living room with a fireplace. At the far corner of the room was a hall that ran parallel to the sanctuary, leading up to a staircase to the second floor.

The bed was on the second floor, and Lawrence had carried her up the stairs and laid her on the bed. The only other objects in the room were a desk and a chair, an open book of scripture and exegesis, and a few letters. The only decoration was a loop of braided straw on one wall.

There were two second-floor rooms; the other bedroom seemed to be used for storage.

Though he was not intentionally looking around, Lawrence could tell at a glance that the room did not contain any of Father Franz’s writings.

The storeroom contained various items used by the church throughout the year—fabric with ceremonial embroidery, candlesticks, swords, and shields. They were all covered in dust, as though they had not been used in a very long time.

Lawrence closed the storeroom's door. He heard the sound of light footsteps coming up the stairs, and when he turned to look, he saw it was Holo.

No doubt she had walked all the way around the hallway that encircled the sanctuary, making a quick check of the interior of the church.

The vague displeasure on her face was probably not overconcern for the still-unconscious Elsa, but rather because she had failed to find any of Father Franz's writings.

"I suppose it will be quickest to ask, after all. If they are hidden, we'll never find them," she admitted.

"You can't sniff them out?" said Lawrence without thinking, but Holo only smiled at him, and he hastily added, "Sorry!"

"So, is she yet asleep? I hardly expected her to be so frail."

"I don't know if that's it. I'm starting to wonder if her circumstances are more difficult than I'd imagined."

He knew he shouldn't, but Lawrence couldn't help reading the letters that were on her desk. Once he finished, he had a much better understanding of the things Elsa had done to stave off Enberch's intervention.

She had claimed to other churches that like Enberch, Tereo followed the orthodox faith and had sought the support of a nearby feudal lord in order to prevent Enberch from attacking.

But looking at the lord's response, Lawrence noticed that he seemed to give his support more out of a debt to Father Franz than out of any

trust Elsa had won on her own.

There were also letters from large dioceses that even Lawrence had heard of.

On the whole, everything was as Lawrence had guessed.

It was not hard to imagine the days when Elsa would have been frantically anticipating the letter's arrival. Even Lawrence, an outsider, could imagine the awful suspense she must have felt.

Nonetheless, he had to guess that her greatest hardship lay somewhere else entirely.

The dust-covered artifacts in the storeroom told a tale all too clear.

Though she was holding off Enberch—with the elder's assistance—it seemed doubtful that any of the villagers felt any gratitude.

It was certainly true that they regarded the church with a measure of disdain.

"...Mm."

As Lawrence was thinking on it, he heard a small sound coming from the bed.

It seemed Elsa was awake.

Lawrence raised his hand to stop Holo, who looked ready to pounce like a wolf that has heard a hare's footsteps. He cleared his throat softly. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Elsa did not jerk herself upright, but simply opened her eyes slowly. Her expression was complicated, as though she was unsure whether to feel surprised, frightened, or angry. She seemed to settle on a vaguely troubled look.

She nodded her head slightly. "Are you not going to tie me up?"

They were bold words.

"If it seemed like you were going to call for someone, I was prepared for that. I have rope in my knapsack."

"And if I should call out now?"

Elsa looked away from Lawrence to Holo—Holo whose wish to know the location of the old tales had brought them here.

"That would benefit neither you nor us," said Lawrence.

Elsa looked back at Lawrence, closing her eyes. He noticed her long eyelashes.

Despite her stoicism, she was still a young woman.

"What I saw...," she began, trying to sit up. Lawrence extended his hand to help her, but she waved it off. "I'm fine."

She looked at Holo with neither malice nor fear, as though looking at heavy clouds that were finally beginning to shed rain. "What I saw was not a dream, was it?"

"'Twould be better for us if you were to think of it as such," said Holo.

"It is said that demons trick humans through dreams."

Though he could tell that Holo was not being entirely serious, Lawrence was less sure about Elsa.

He looked at Holo; her annoyed expression suggested that she was at least partly in earnest.

The tension between the two had more to do with conflicting personalities, Lawrence guessed, than it did with the fact that one was a devout member of the Church while the other was a spirit of the harvest.

“So long as we reach our goal, we will disappear like a dream and trouble you no further. I ask you again: Will you show us the writings of Father Franz?” asked Lawrence, coming between the two.

“I…I still cannot be sure that you were not sent from Enberch. But if that is indeed the case…what is your goal?”

Lawrence was unsure whether he should answer this question. He looked at Holo, who nodded slowly.

“I wish to return to my home,” she said.

“Your home…?”

“But ages have passed since I was there. I have forgotten the way, and I know not if my old friends are well. Indeed, I cannot even be sure it still exists,” explained Holo plainly. “What would you do if you learned there might be someone who knew something of your home?”

Even someone who had spent a lifetime in the same village would want to know how that village was viewed by others.

It was all the more true for people who had left their homes.

Elsa was silent for some time, and Holo did not press her.

Her downcast eyes made it clear that she was deep in thought.

Despite her youth, it was obvious that she was no maiden who blithely floated through life, picking flowers and singing songs.

When Lawrence had claimed to want to confess his sins, he could tell that her solemnity was no affectation.

Though she may have fainted upon first seeing Holo’s inhuman nature, Lawrence felt she was smart enough to make the best decision given the situation.

Elsa put her hand to her chest and recited a prayer, then looked up.

“I am a servant of God,” she said, continuing before Lawrence or Holo could interrupt. “But at the same time, I am Father Franz’s successor.” She got off the bed, smoothing the wrinkles in her cassock, then clearing her throat. “I do not believe that you have been possessed by a demon, because Father Franz always said there was no such thing.”

Lawrence was more than a little surprised at Elsa’s statement, but Holo’s expression seemed to say that as long as she could see the records, all was well.

Eventually Holo seemed to become aware of Elsa’s willingness to give in, and though her face remained serious, the tip of her tail wagged restlessly.

“Please come with me. I will show you.”

For a moment Lawrence wondered if she had only said this to escape, but Holo followed without question, so evidently there was no need to worry.

Once they came to the living room on the first floor, Elsa lightly touched the brick wall next to the fireplace with her fingers.

Then coming to a particular stone, she slowly pulled it free.

Having pulled it out like a drawer, Elsa turned the brick over, and a slender golden key fell into her hand.

From behind, her form was every bit the stoic girl she was.

She lit a candle and put it on a stand, then turned to Lawrence and Holo.

“Let us go,” she said quietly, then walked down the hallway that continued deeper into the church.

The church was deeper than Lawrence had guessed.

Unlike the sanctuary, clean and well used thanks to constant prayer, the state of the hallway could hardly be complimented.

The candlesticks on the walls were covered with cobwebs, and little pieces of stone that had crumbled off from the walls crunched constantly underfoot.

“Here we are,” said Elsa, stopping. The direction she pointed in was probably directly behind the sanctuary.

There on a pedestal was a statue of the Holy Mother roughly as large as a young child. The Holy Mother held her hands together in prayer and faced the entrance to the church.

The space behind the sanctuary was the holiest place in the church.

Saintly remains or bones—so-called “holy relics”—and other items important to the Church were stored here.

It was the standard place for the Church to keep precious things, and so to use it to store writings on pagan stories took a good deal of nerve.

“May God forgive us,” murmured Elsa. She took the brass key in her hand and inserted it into a small hole at the base of the statue.

The tiny keyhole was not easy to spot in the gloom. Elsa turned the key with some force, and from within the statue came the distinct sound of something unlocking.

“In his will, Father Franz said that the statue could be removed from the pedestal…but I have never seen it opened.”

“Understood,” said Lawrence with a nod.

As soon as he approached the statue, Elsa backed away, worry in her eyes.

Taking hold of the statue, Lawrence hefted it with force, but it lifted

unexpectedly easily.

Evidently it was hollow.

“Oof!...There.” Lawrence set the statue down beside the wall, taking care that it didn’t fall over.

Elsa looked at the space left by the statue, hesitating for a moment, but under Holo’s insistent gaze, she approached it again.

She turned the key in the opposite direction and removed it, this time inserting it into a small hole in the floor some distance away from the pedestal and turning it twice clockwise.

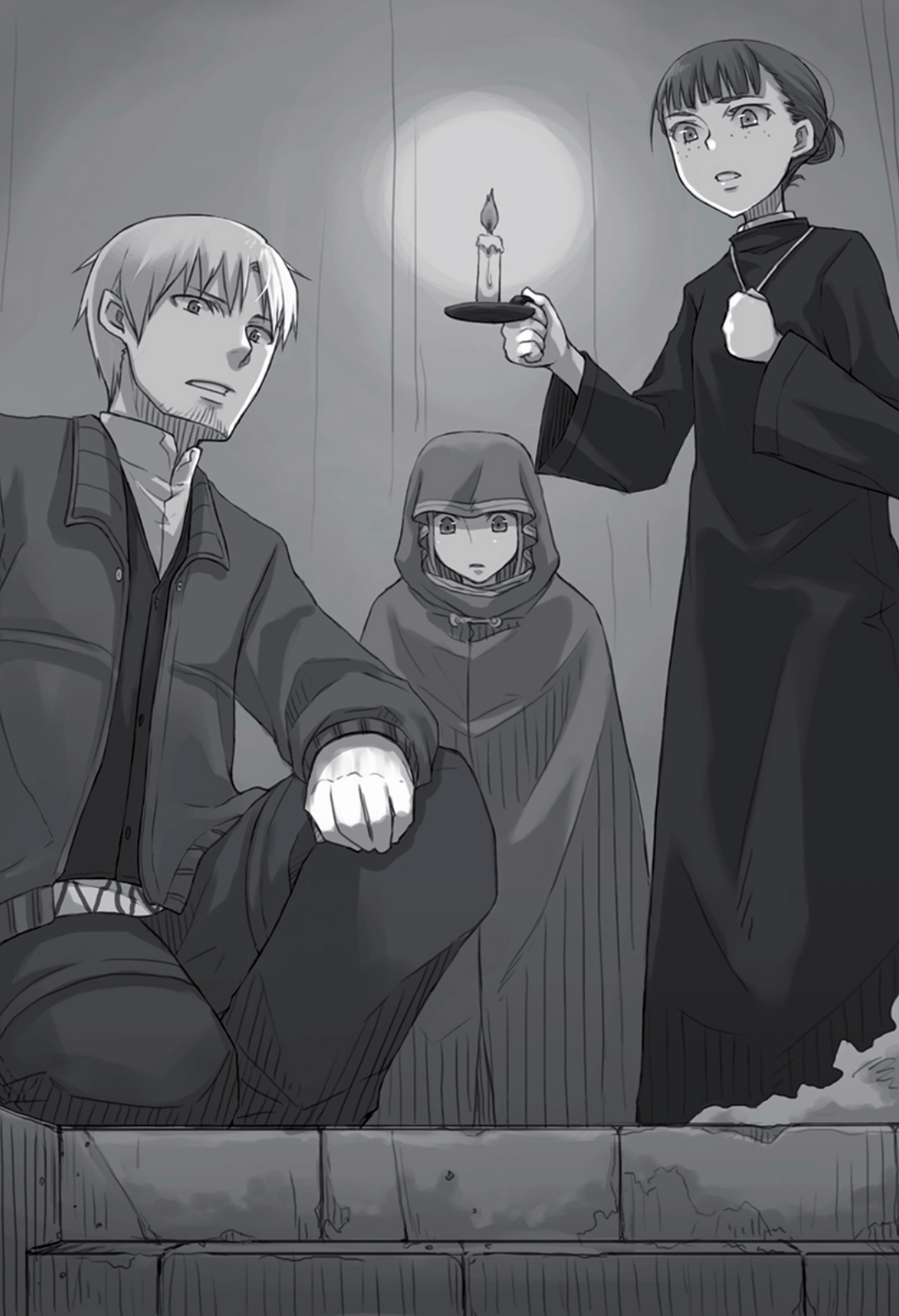
“Now...we should be able to lift the pedestal and stone free from the floor,” Elsa said, still crouching. Holo looked at Lawrence.

Offering any opposition now would bring her sincere ire down upon him, so he sighed and prepared himself. But at that moment, he glimpsed her making an uneasy expression.

She had made a similar expression before, only to then tease Lawrence by saying, “So you like to see me this way?” Thus he could not be sure whether or not she was truly concerned, but the possibility of it was enough to give him renewed vigor.

“It seems like the only place to take hold of it...is the pedestal. Something like this—”

Not knowing exactly how to open the floor, Lawrence looked it over, then planted his feet and took hold of the pedestal. Given the way the seams of the floor stones went, it appeared that the stone nearest the church entrance would lift.



“Hng!” Lawrence braced himself and pulled up. There was an unpleasant grinding sound, like sand in a millstone—but sure enough, the pedestal lifted, along with the floor stones.

Keeping his position, he shifted his grip and lifted with all his might.

Stone ground against stone, and rusted metal creaked as the floor lifted up, revealing a dark cellar.

It did not appear to be very deep; at the foot of the stone stairs was something that looked like a bookcase.

“Shall we go in?”

“...I will go first,” said Elsa.

It seemed that at the very least, Elsa had no intention of letting Lawrence and Holo enter first and then closing the door behind them.

And in any case, having come this far, there was no point in hesitation.

“Understood. The air seems a bit stale, so be careful,” said Lawrence.

Elsa nodded, and then holding the candle in one hand, she made her way carefully down the steep steps.

Two or three steps past the point where her head was just beneath the floor, Elsa stopped to place the candle in a hollow carved in the wall. She then proceeded.

Lawrence had worried that she planned to set fire to the contents of the room, but apparently he could relax on that count.

“You seem still more suspicious than I,” said Holo, perhaps having noticed his concern.

Elsa returned shortly.

In her hands she carried a sealed letter along with a bundle of parchment.

She was half crawling back up the steps, so Lawrence extended a hand to help her.

"...Thank you. I apologize for the wait."

"Not at all. Are those...?" asked Lawrence.

"Letters," answered Elsa briefly. "The books within are what you seek, I believe."

"May we take them out to read them?" asked Lawrence.

"I would ask you to read them within the church." It was a reasonable answer.

"I shall enter, then," said Holo, quickly descending the stairs and entering the cellar. She was soon out of sight.

Though he didn't follow Holo down, it wasn't because Lawrence wanted to watch over Elsa.

"I know it's late to be saying this, but I know that we forced you into this. I thank you and offer my apologies," said Lawrence to Elsa, who stared vaguely down into the cellar entrance.

"Yes, you did indeed force me," said Elsa.

Lawrence had no words in the face of her glare.

"Still...still, I think Father Franz would have been pleased."

"Eh?"

"He was fond of saying, 'The stories I collect are no mere fairy tales.'" Elsa's grip on the letter she held tightened.

Those letters had probably been left behind by the late Father.

“This is my first time entering this cellar as well. I did not expect there to be so many books. If you plan to read them all, you may wish to make new arrangements at the inn.”

At her statement, Lawrence suddenly remembered that he and Holo had worn traveling clothes in order to trick her.

They had of course also settled their account with the inn.

“Ah, but you might call someone else while we go,” said Lawrence.

He hadn’t been entirely joking, but Elsa in any case seemed unamused. “I serve this church. It is my intention to embrace the true faith. I would never lay such a trap,” she said, smoothing her tightly bound hair and shooting Lawrence a stern glance, even sharper than the ones he had received upon first meeting her. “Even in the sanctuary, I did not tell a lie.”

It was true that her silence then did not constitute a lie.

Yet in spite of her resolve and the keenness of her gaze, her childlike insistence on this point reminded Lawrence of a certain someone else he knew.

So he merely nodded and agreed. “I was the one who set a trap. However, had I not done so, you would never have agreed to my request.”

“I shall remember never to let my guard down around a merchant,” said Elsa with a sigh.

Holo came staggering back up the stairs, carrying a heavy volume with her. “Hey—you—”

Lawrence hurried to help Holo, who seemed unable to bear the weight of the book and looked as though she might topple over backward. He grabbed her arms, helping her support the book.

The magnificent tome was bound in leather and reinforced at the

corners with iron.

"Whew. This is certainly not something one simply wanders about with. May I read it here?" asked Holo.

"I do not mind, but please extinguish the candle when you are finished. This church is not wealthy, after all."

"Hmph," said Holo, looking at Lawrence.

Since none of the villagers attended services, there were no tithes.

It was easy to assume that Elsa spoke not out of malice or spite but simply because that was the truth.

Lawrence opened his coin purse, taking out some money—his thanks for having his confession heard and for having troubled her so.

"I have heard that if a merchant wishes to rise to the kingdom of heaven, he must lighten his coin purse," he said.

"..."

He offered three silver coins.

They would be enough to buy a roomful of candles.

"God's blessing be on you," said Elsa, taking the coins, then turning and walking away.

Lawrence guessed that if she was willing to accept the coins, she must not consider them tainted.

"So what do you think? Can you read it yourself?" he asked Holo.

"I can. I am lucky on that count. I owe it to my exemplary conduct."

She had gall to make jokes like that in a church.

“And which god is it that blesses people with luck according to their righteousness?”

“If you want to know, you’d best get me an offering.”

Lawrence felt sure that if he was to turn and look at the statue of the Holy Mother leaning against the wall, a bitter smile would have been on her face.

Once they returned to the inn and secured their room again—after enduring some teasing from the laughing innkeeper—Lawrence pondered what he would do next.

They had gotten Elsa to reveal her secret and discovered Father Franz’s books. So far, so good.

Though Holo had revealed her ears and tail, as long as Enberch continued to watch for a chance to strike, Elsa could not reveal the truth.

Lawrence admitted to himself that it was possible Elsa would tell the truth of Holo’s nature to the villagers in order to goad them into action, saying she was a servant of evil come to bring calamity upon the village.

But as to the question of whether she had anything to gain from such an action, the answer was an obvious “no.”

Though Elsa had fainted upon first seeing Holo’s ears, ever since she’d awoken, she had regarded Holo with neither fear nor loathing.

Truthfully she probably saved her loathing for Lawrence.

All that being the case, the next problem would be the people surrounding Elsa—Sem the village elder and Evan. If they were to learn of Holo’s nature, there was no telling what would happen.

There were a considerable number of books to read in the cellar. Holo and Lawrence would need some time to go through all of them.

If he could, he wanted to let Holo read to her heart's content while he took responsibility for keeping her safe as she did so.

Though she had accused him of being paranoid, he felt that he had not been suspicious *enough*.

But there was no guarantee that taking this or that action wouldn't rouse a sleeping snake, so to speak.

He returned to the church, thinking that in any case they needed to come up with some kind of pretense for why they were spending time there.

He found Elsa reading letters at a desk that looked far too big for her in the living room, which was every bit as painfully simple as her bedroom. She did not look as though she had secretly informed the villagers and was merely waiting for his return to spring the trap.

When he had knocked on the church's front door, there'd been no response, so he took the liberty of coming in. There was little reaction from her when he entered the living room.

Elsa merely glanced at Lawrence, saying nothing.

He couldn't very well just walk by her into the back of the church without saying anything.

"Are you sure you don't want to keep an eye on us? We might steal the books, you know," he said jokingly.

"If you planned to do that, there would be no reason not to tie me up," she shot back correctly.

Evidently Holo was not the only tough girl in the world.

"And if you were from Enberch, you'd already be speeding back to the town on a fast horse."

"Ah, but is that really true? There's nothing to say you wouldn't set

fire to the books in the cellar. If the books were ash within the time it takes to get to Enberch and back, there'd be no proof."

The exchange was both light banter and irritated conversation.

Elsa sighed and looked at Lawrence. "So long as you do not plan to bring calamity upon the village, I have not the slightest intention of raising a fuss. Though it's true that your companion has no business being in a church, I…"

She trailed off, closing her eyes as if not wanting to see a question that had no answer.

"All we wish to do is learn more of the northlands. Your suspicion is completely understandable."

"No," said Elsa, her voice unexpectedly firm.

Having done so, she seemed to realize she hadn't prepared for words that would follow this denial.

It was only after letting out a deep sigh that she was able to continue. "No…if the question is whether I feel suspicion, I admit I do. If it were possible, I wish that I could consult with someone else. But…my problem is of a larger…"

"You wish to know if my companion is truly what she claims to be?"

Elsa's face froze as though she had swallowed a needle. "There is that as well, yes…"

She looked down, the only remaining hint of her steadfast nature being her ramrod-straight spine.

She seemed unable to continue.

Lawrence then asked, "And what else?"

Elsa did not reply.

Lawrence's livelihood was negotiating with people.

When a person withdrew, he knew when to pursue and when to wait for that person to open up again.

This was undoubtedly the former.

"I cannot take your confession, but I may be able to give you some advice. However..."

Elsa peered at him as though from within a deep cave.

"...However, you will only be able to get sincere answers on things outside of business," Lawrence finished with a smile. He felt that just for a moment, Elsa also smiled.

"No," she said, "the question I have may well be best asked of a person like you. Might I ask you, then?"

When asking a favor, it is a very difficult thing to avoid seeming servile and to also preserve one's dignity without appearing high-handed.

Yet Elsa managed it.

She was the image of the clergy.

"I cannot guarantee that any answer I give will be satisfying."

Elsa nodded and spoke slowly, as if to be sure of every word she said. "If...if the stories collected in the books in the cellar are not false..."

"Yes...?"

"Does that mean the God we believe in *is* false?"

"..."

It was a simple question but an extremely serious one at the same

time.

The God of the Church was omnipotent, omniscient; there were none but him.

His existence was incompatible with the many gods of the pagan tradition.

“My father—I mean, Father Franz—gathered many tales of the pagan gods of the northlands. He was suspected of heresy more than a few times, yet he was a fine priest who never once missed his daily prayers. If your companion truly is a pagan spirit, that means the God we believe in is a lie. And Father never once doubted God, not even on his deathbed.”

If so, her tragic worries were not hard to understand.

It seemed the adoptive father she’d loved and respected so had not spoken to her about a great many things.

Perhaps he had thought they were not relevant to Elsa, that such matters didn’t concern her—or perhaps he’d meant her to ponder them on her own. There was no way to know.

But to Elsa, who had no one with whom she could discuss her worries, they were a heavy burden indeed.

No matter how heavy the load, it could be carried as long as it was placed firmly on one’s back. However, all it took was a small disturbance for the whole load to come falling apart.

As soon as Elsa began to speak, her words became rapid, as though she could not hold them back if she wanted to.

“Is it because my faith is lacking? I know not. I have not the courage to rebuke the two of you, scriptures and holy water in hand. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing—no, what it is at all, I do not—”

“My companion—,” Lawrence interjected before Elsa could corner herself with her own words. “My companion, though her true form is a giant wolf, does not wish to be called a god nor worshipped as one.”

Elsa listened quietly, desperately, a lost soul hoping for salvation.

“I am, as you see, nothing more than a merchant of no special birth. I know little of the teachings of God. I cannot tell you what is right and what is wrong,” said Lawrence, very much aware that Holo was probably eavesdropping on the conversation. “But I do not believe that Father Franz was mistaken.”

“Why...why do you believe that?”

Lawrence nodded thoughtfully, taking a moment to prepare his opinions.

It was possible that he was totally off the mark. Indeed, that possibility might have been the larger one.

But he felt a strange certainty that he understood Father Franz’s point of view.

Just as he was about to speak again, Lawrence was interrupted by the sound of a knock at the church’s door.

“...That will be Elder Sem. I imagine he is here to ask about you and your companion.” She seemed to be able to tell who was at the door by the sound of the knocking; perhaps this came from a need to tell whether the noise was someone from Enberch.

Wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, she stood, then glanced toward the interior of the church. “If you find yourself unable to trust me, you can get out there through an exit near the stove by the hallway. If you trust me—”

“I trust you. I don’t know whether I can trust Sem.”

Elsa neither shook her head nor nodded. “Then please stay in the

back of the church," she said. "I will explain that I've been asking you about the news from the churches of other lands. It is not really a lie..."

"I understand. I'll be happy to share my experiences," answered Lawrence with a smile. He was about to do as he was told and hide away in the back of the church when he noticed that Elsa had returned to her usual stoic self.

He asked himself in that moment if she would betray him. The answer came, No, she would not.

Though Lawrence did not trust in God, he did trust in those who did.

He decided he did not mind such ironies.

Lawrence walked down the dimly lit hallway. Eventually he saw the vague flicker of candlelight from around a corner.

There was no way Holo had not overheard his exchange with Elsa, so he prepared himself for whatever expression might await him as he rounded the corner.

There was Holo sitting cross-legged with an open book in her lap. She lifted her face to him, displeasure written all over it.

"Am I so very malicious, then?"

"...You're inventing cause for offense," said Lawrence, shrugging.

Holo snorted. "Your trepidation was plain as day; I could hear it in your footsteps."

"Merchants only read minds, not feet."

"...That was awful," Holo pronounced of Lawrence's joke. "Still, you were quite considerate to the girl."

Lawrence both expected and did not expect this subject to come up.

He did not immediately answer, instead sitting down next to Holo, careful not to step on her tail. He picked up one of the thick books that lay there. “Merchants must always be considerate to their customers. But that’s not important. Can you hear the elder’s conversation with Elsa?”

When someone asked advice, it was important to maintain confidence and trust.

But Holo’s displeasure at the change of subject was written large on her face, and she simply looked down at the book she was reading.

Lawrence wondered to himself just who it had been, back in Ruvinheigen, that said if you have something to say, you should just come out and say it.

He wanted very much to point that out to Holo, but he could scarcely imagine the fit she would pitch if he was to do so.

However, Holo was not a completely unreasonable girl.

Before she had completely cornered herself, she relented. “She’s acting more or less as she said she would. That Sem fellow, or whatever his name was, seems to have just been checking in on her... He’s just now leaving.”

“If the elder would understand our situation, this would be a lot simpler.”

“Can you not persuade him yourself?”

For a moment, Lawrence thought Holo was mocking him; perceiving this, she glared at him.

“You overestimate me.”

“You don’t wish me to trust you, then?” asked Holo with a serious face.

Lawrence chuckled ruefully. “As ever, time is the problem. If we dally too long here, it may snow.”

“And what would be wrong with that?”

She seemed to be asking in earnest, so his reply was likewise serious. “If we were to be snowed in somewhere, would a large village or a small town be better?”

“Ah, I see. Still, we’ve a true mountain of books to get through. There’s no telling how long it will take us.”

“True, but we need only find stories that are relevant to you. If we read quickly, the two of us together should be able to make short work of it.”

“Mm.” Holo nodded, smiling as if somehow pleased.

“What is it?”

As soon as he asked, her smile disappeared.

“This is hardly the time to be asking me that,” she said with a resigned sigh. “I don’t know whether you are truly that slow or…ah, ’tis well.”

Seeing Holo waving him off, Lawrence thought back over what he had said.

Could it be? he wondered.

Had she been pleased to hear “the two of us together”?

“’Tis too late for you to say it now. I would only become angry.”

Lawrence took this as fair warning and closed his mouth.

Holo flipped through a few pages, sighing.

Slowly she let her body lean against his. “Did I not once say I was

tired of being alone?" she reminded him reproachfully.

The thought nagged at Lawrence. "Sorry."

"Mm." Holo sniffed, then reached around and began to massage her left shoulder.

Seeing this, Lawrence had to smile.

She looked at him with a face that said, "Are you not going to help?"

Lawrence obediently brought his hand around to attend to her shoulders.

Holo sighed, satisfied, her tail brushing softly against the floor.

Even half a year ago, it would have seemed impossible to Lawrence that he would be quietly passing time with someone this way.

She was tired of being alone.

Lawrence felt precisely the same way.

Immediately after the thought passed through his mind, Lawrence heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps on stone. He hastily tried to pull his hand away from Holo's shoulder when her hand grabbed his with uncanny strength.

"The elder has gone, but about what you were...," said Elsa as she was coming around the corner. Lawrence had managed to withdraw his hand and put on his most neutral merchant's face, but Holo continued to lean against him all the same.

Her body trembled slightly, as though she were suppressing laughter. At first glance, it probably looked as though she was sleeping, her face pressed against his shoulder.

Elsa took this in silently, then nodded as if having come to some kind of conclusion. "Well, then, I will return later."

Though her voice was as hard as ever, her consideration was evident from the way she lowered it.

Once the sound of her footsteps faded into silence as she walked away, Holo sat up and laughed.

"Look, you—," said Lawrence, but his accusatory tone went unheeded.

She laughed and laughed, eventually having to wipe a tear from the corner of her eye, then smiled maliciously at Lawrence. "Is it so humiliating then for you to be seen holding my shoulder?"

Lawrence knew that no matter how he answered, he would be falling into a trap.

He had lost the moment he'd so happily agreed to massage her shoulders.

"Though I will admit," started Holo, her nasty smile disappearing as she contentedly lay her head against Lawrence again, "that I *did* wish to show off a bit."

Lawrence suppressed the urge to pull away from her.

"I would hate for you to be taken away from me," she said.

As a man, he could not help but feel pleased hearing this.

But he could hardly forget that it was Holo, the self-styled wisewolf, who said it.

He sighed. "You mean you would hate for your favorite toy to be taken from you."

Holo grinned at him. "If that's what you think, will you then play with me?"

Lawrence could only sigh.

The candle on the stand had lost its shape, and the pile of books they'd read had grown tall enough to lean upon when the church had another visitor.

Holo lifted her head, her ears erect.

"Who's that?" Lawrence asked.

Holo giggled happily, not offering a serious reply—which meant it was probably Evan.

Lawrence didn't have to guess why Holo was laughing.

"It's gotten late, though...It's dark now."

He stood up straight and stretched, his spine popping gratifyingly.

He had gotten sucked into reading. The tales were interesting in their own right, even without the motivation of reading for Holo's sake.

"I'm hungry also."

"Quite. Shall we take a rest?" Lawrence let his stiff body relax as he reached for the candle. "Let's not let Evan see your true nature. The fewer people who know the secret, the better."

"Mm. Though that girl will likely tell him all the same."

"I don't know...I don't think so."

Elsa didn't strike Lawrence as the kind of girl who would easily let a secret slip. Despite Evan's statement that she told him how many sneezes she had in a day, she hadn't mentioned Lawrence and Holo's first visit to the church to him.

"Oh no?" came Holo's skeptical reply. "That girl seems troubled over something. Depending on what she decides, who can say what she will do?"

“Ah, her questions about God. I suppose that is true now that you mention it.”

At the time, Lawrence hadn’t found a chance to give Elsa his answer, winding up instead lost in a book.

But as he thought on it, he wondered if that wasn’t for the best.

“Incidentally, what were you planning to tell her?” Holo asked.

“Well, I might have been completely mistaken anyway.”

“I would hardly expect a perfect answer from you.”

It was a nasty thing to say, but hearing it put so bluntly made it easier for Lawrence to answer. “The way I see it, Father Franz collected tales of the pagan gods to prove the existence of his own god.”

“Oh, ho.”

“Praying every day, day after day, yet never seeing so much as a hint of one’s god—anyone would begin to doubt, don’t you think?”

Holo—who had been thus doubted—nodded, annoyed by the memory of it.

“But if he then started to look around, he would have seen that there were many, many other gods that people worship. Does that god exist? What about this other one? It’s only natural that he would’ve started to wonder. If he could prove the existence of the gods worshipped by others, then that would mean his own God existed, too.”

Of course, this manner of thought was a complete anathema to the Church.

Shortly after Lawrence met Holo for the first time, the two had taken shelter from the rain in a church. Holo had some knowledge of

Church beliefs and had been able to chat easily with the believers there—so this had to have occurred to her as well.

"Aye, but the God of the Church is a supreme being, is he not? There are no other gods before him, and he created the world—people merely borrow it—is that not what they hold?"

"It is. Which is why I believe this is truly an abbey, not a church."

Holo's increasingly annoyed expression was no doubt because she did not follow Lawrence's logic.

"Do you know the difference between an abbey and a church?"

Holo was not so vain as to feign knowledge when she was ignorant. She shook her head.

"An abbey is a place for prayer. A church is a place for teaching about God. Their aims are entirely separate. Abbeys are built in remote regions with no thought given to guiding people down the correct path. The reason monks may spend their whole lives within one is that there is simply no reason to leave."

"Hm."

"So what do you think would be the first thing a monk would do if he began to doubt the existence of God?"

Holo's gaze drifted.

The fish within her mind were surely swimming farther through the sea of knowledge and wisdom.

"Indeed—he would seek to ascertain the existence of the God he worshipped, which means our treatment depends even more upon what that girl decides to do," said Holo.

"I'm glad I didn't tell her any of this during the day. Elsa's not a nun—she's a member of the clergy."

Holo nodded briefly, glancing at the pile of books.

They hadn't yet looked at even half of the volumes in the cellar.

Though they did not necessarily have to look at every book, they still had not found the stories that Holo sought.

Had there been an index where they could have looked for gods of a certain region, that would have sped things up considerably, but as it was, they had no choice but to search page by page through the chronicles.

"Well, in any case, all we can do is search the books as quickly as we can. There is still the problem with Enberch, after all."

"Mm. True, but"—Holo's gaze turned to the hallway that led to the room where Elsa and Evan were—"first let us eat."

A moment later, they could hear Evan's footsteps as he came to invite them to dinner.

"We thank God for blessing us with bread this day."

After saying the traditional prayer, the four enjoyed a fairly luxurious meal—owing, Elsa explained, to Lawrence's overgenerous donation.

However, luxurious in a church meant bread enough for everyone, a few side dishes, and a bit of wine.

On the table was rye bread along with some fish Evan had caught in the river and some boiled eggs. Based on Lawrence's experience, for a church with coffers that were hardly deep and rules that were not unstrict, it was quite a feast.

No doubt Holo was unsatisfied by the lack of red meat, but fortunately there were other side dishes for her.

"Come, don't be so messy. Take a piece of bread, *then* eat it,"

corrected Elsa, eliciting a shrug from Evan every time she did so. Just a moment ago Elsa had been unable to watch Evan fumbling to shell a boiled egg and had helped him with it.

Holo had watched this with a certain amount of regret, perhaps because she had already eaten her own egg. Lawrence noted this and realized it had been a close call.

"Fine, fine!" said Evan. "Anyway, Mr. Lawrence, as you were saying..." Evan's complaining was less that he was genuinely annoyed and more that he did not want to look bad in front of Lawrence and Holo.

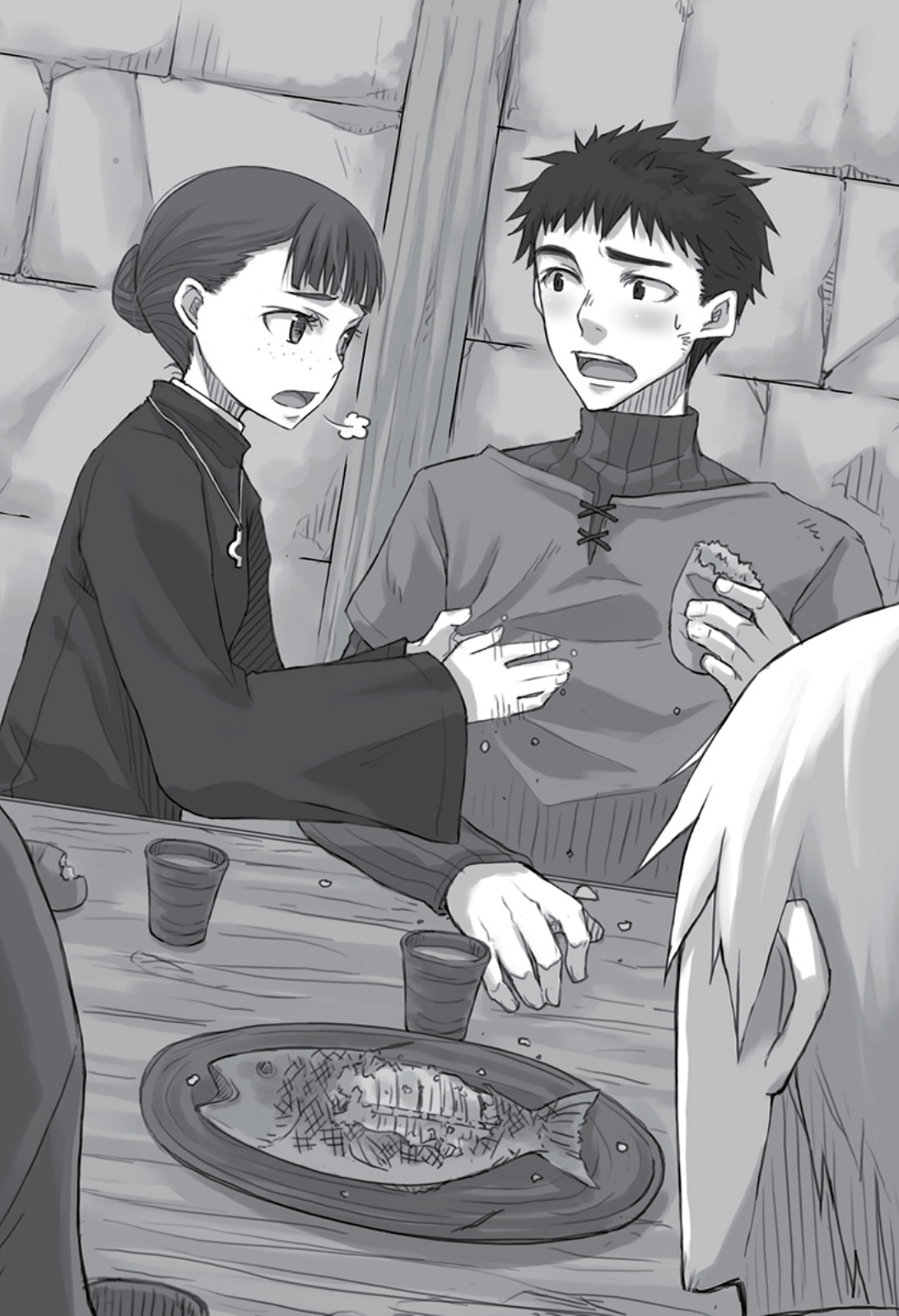
Though Holo was good at hiding it as she ate, she was clearly smiling.

Only Elsa seemed to be seriously concerned with Evan's sloppiness; she sighed.

"Er, let's see, where was I?" said Lawrence.

"The ship had left harbor and gotten past the cape where rocks lurked beneath the waves."

"Oh yes, of course. That particular harbor was dangerous until you reached the open sea. Every merchant aboard was huddled up belowdeck, praying for their lives."



Lawrence was telling of a time he had transported cargo by ship. Evan knew little of the ocean and was keenly interested.

"Once we learned we had safely passed the cape, we all came abovedeck to discover there were ships all around us."

"Even though it was the sea?"

"Well, it's only natural for there to be ships in the sea," said Lawrence, chuckling in spite of himself.

Elsa sighed a long-suffering sigh.

Evan was the only one among them never to have seen the ocean, so his position was a bit unsteady.

But Lawrence understood what Evan had meant to say, and so he continued. "It was an amazing sight. The sea was dense with vessels, all hauling in great mountains of fish."

"Wouldn't...wouldn't they run out of fish to catch?"

Holo shot Lawrence a glance of extreme skepticism, as though to say, "Even if he's lying, nobody could be *that* ignorant."

"Anyone who's seen the sea there during that season will tell you about the black rivers of fish that run through the water."

The herring schools were a magnificent sight. It was said that a sharpened stick thrust at random into the water would come back with three fish upon it.

It was unfortunate that short of having Evan see the sight with his own eyes, there was no way Lawrence could convey to him the truth or scale of the sea.

"Wow...I can't really imagine it, but I guess the outside world is a big place."

“But the most surprising thing on the ship was the food,” continued Lawrence.

“Oh?” Holo was now the most interested party.

“Yes, since there were merchants from so many different regions. There was a man from a place called Ebgod, which is near a salt lake. His bread was incredibly salty.”

Everyone looked at the bread in the middle of the table.

“I can understand making bread sweet, but his bread tasted as though it had salt sprinkled over it. It did not quite agree with my palate.”

“Salt, eh? He must have been a rich man to put salt upon bread!” said Evan, impressed.

Tereo was landlocked, and if there was no nearby source of rock salt, then it would have been a luxury item.

“Yes, but Ebgod has a salt lake. Imagine a salt river running through town and every field as far as the eye can see turned to salt. There’s so much salt everywhere that the people there enjoy salty bread.”

“Still, salty bread!” said Evan, disgust on his face.

“There were other strange things on the ship, too—like flat bread baked in the bottom of a bowl.”

A loaf’s value was in its rise—or at least, anyone used to baking bread in an oven would think so.

“Ha, surely not.”

Lawrence was pleased to hear the answer he had expected. “Ah, but if you make bread from oats, then it will turn out flat and even, will it not?”

“Well, I suppose...,” said Evan.

“Would you not eat unleavened bread, then?”

Lawrence was referring to bread that had not been blessed by the bread spirits but had rather been baked immediately after kneading.

It was unlikely that Evan had never eaten it—but he probably hadn’t enjoyed it much.

“While one could hardly call oat bread delicious even as flattery, the bowl bread was quite tasty, particularly topped with beans or the like.”

“Amazing,” said Evan, impressed, his eyes staring distantly at some far-off imagined place.

By contrast, Elsa had torn off a piece of rye bread and seemed to be comparing it to the flat bread in her imagination.

The two were highly amusing.

“Anyway, the world is a vast place with much to see,” said Lawrence, wrapping things up. Next to him, Holo had finished eating and seemed to be getting restless. “My deepest thanks to you for preparing such a feast for us,” he added.

“Not at all. It is thanks to your generous donation. This is the least I could do,” said Elsa.

If only she would spare us the slightest smile when she said so, Lawrence thought ruefully.

Nonetheless, it did seem she hadn’t felt forced to make the dinner, which gave him some measure of relief.

“So, about later...”

“If you wish to read the books at night as well, I do not mind. I know your aim is the northlands, and if it starts to snow, it will make

your situation difficult."

Conversation moved quickly with Elsa. Lawrence was grateful.

"Well, then, Mr. Lawrence—you'll have to tell me more stories later!" said Evan.

"He already said he was in a hurry. And today you have to practice writing," said Elsa.

Evan ducked his head, looking to Lawrence with a pained expression that begged for help.

That brief instant made Elsa and Evan's relationship crystal clear.

"When the opportunity arises, I shall. And we'll impose upon your church's hospitality a bit longer then, thank you."

"Yes, feel free."

Lawrence and Holo stood, giving their thanks for dinner one last time before leaving the living room.

He noticed Elsa giving Holo a casual glance as they went, but Holo pretended not to see it.

"Oh, that's right." Lawrence turned just as they were walking out the door and looked to Elsa. "About the question you asked me earlier."

"I will consider it on my own," she said. "'Think before asking,' Father Franz used to say."

Elsa was not the timid, scared girl she had been earlier in the day, but instead showed the stoutness of heart she would need to support the church on her own.

"I understand. If you want to hear the thoughts of another, please do come and ask."

“I shall, thank you.”

Evan, unable to follow the conversation, looked back and forth between Lawrence and Elsa until a call from the latter put his attention to other matters.

Despite his complaints, Evan seemed to be enjoying his exchange with Elsa as they started clearing the dining table.

Though Evan seemed by turns put-upon or annoyed by Elsa’s constant corrections, he would sometimes take her hand or say her name, and the two would share a quiet smile.

It was the sort of interaction Lawrence had deliberately avoided paying attention to as a merchant.

No, he had even mocked them.

He held the sconce with its lit candle and gazed at Holo’s form in front of him there in the hallway, illuminated by the candle’s flickering light.

Eventually Holo turned the corner, and she was out of his sight.

Lawrence thought back.

He had plied the dark roads, stingy even with his candles, picking up gold coins as he traveled.

Even though he’d become desperate enough for company to begin to wish he could talk to his horse, he still had never taken his eyes from the path of those gold coins. This behavior seemed truly strange in retrospect.

He continued his slow walk down the hallway, relying on the small candle to light his way.

As he turned the corner, he saw Holo there, already reading a book.

Suddenly she spoke. “And what happened to you?”

“Hm?”

“That expression of yours—did a hole suddenly open in your coin purse?” she asked with a laugh.

Lawrence put his hand to his cheek in spite of himself. Outside of business negotiations, he was quite oblivious to the expressions his face made.

“Was I making a face?”

“Mm.”

“Oh. Wait...oh.”

Holo’s shoulders shook with mirth. “Perhaps the wine has gotten to you?”

Lawrence reflected on this; his head *did* feel a bit muzzy, come to think of it.

No—he knew exactly what it was that had made him fall into such a strange mood.

He was simply unsure where that left him.

“Those two certainly get along well,” he said, meaning nothing in particular by this.

He had truly not put any thought into the muttered statement.

But the moment he said it, Holo made an expression that he would long remember.

Her eyes were wide and round.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” asked Lawrence—now *he* was the surprised one.

But Holo merely stared, evidently too stunned to voice anything

more than an inarticulate groan. Eventually she returned to herself, but merely stared off into space, an expression of deep distress on her face.

"...Did I really say something *that* strange?" Lawrence asked.

Holo did not reply, her fingers restlessly flipping corners of the book's pages.

Her expression was troubled, but whether she was stunned or angry or at a loss, it was hard to tell. Just looking at her, Lawrence himself was becoming upset.

"Er—well, now—look, you—," she started.

At length, she glanced over at him. Something in her eyes looked as though she had given up on something.

She seemed so deeply distressed that Lawrence dared not ask what was wrong again. If he did, she might be likely to collapse on the spot.

What was worse, when she continued to speak, he didn't understand what she was saying.

"I, er...for the most part, I...I know well my own good points and the bad as well."

"Ah, oh."

"But...er...perhaps it is strange to say so myself, but...having lived so many years, I can laugh off most things. Of course, sometimes I cannot. You should know this quite well yourself...yes?"

Somehow, Holo seemed to have been forced to make a difficult decision. Lawrence drew back a bit and nodded.

Holo put down the book she held, sitting cross-legged and grasping her ankles, her head low. She seemed in truly dire straits, avoiding looking at Lawrence as though it would blind her to do so.

Seeing her on the verge of tears, Lawrence could not help but feel deep concern. Then she spoke.

"Come now, you—"

Lawrence nodded.

"I...I wish that you would not sound so envious when you speak of them," she said.

Lawrence stood there, stunned, as if he'd been walking a crowded street only to sneeze and find everyone around him suddenly vanished.

"I, too...no, I understand. I understand, but I did not want to say it...that seen from the outside, we, too, must look quite the fools."

Quite the fools—the implications of the term sunk heavily into Lawrence's ears.

It was a terrifying sensation, not unlike having completed a large business deal only to discover the calculations had been performed in the wrong currency.

Their relationship was something that had to be considered, yet considering it was terrifying.

Holo forcedly cleared her throat, scratching on the floor loudly with her fingernails. "I myself do not...I do not know why it is so embarrassing. No, I should even be angry—'those two certainly get along well,' you said so enviously, so what am I—"

"No," said Lawrence, cutting her off.

Holo glared at him like an angry child looking at an adult.

"No, I understand," he continued. "I think."

Holo's face became visibly darker at the way his voice grew hoarse at the end of his statement.

"No—I do understand. I do. I always have. I just didn't want to put it into words."

Holo began to rise, now on one knee rather than cross-legged. Her gaze was less doubtful and more of a warning—she seemed to be saying that she would not take betrayal lightly.

She might well fly at Lawrence, should he speak clumsily.

Her state seemed to be pushing him into saying something he normally would not have wanted to say.

"I *was* envious, but not of their relationship itself."

Holo hugged her knee.

Lawrence continued. "I should have made you give up searching this place."

She looked at him, stunned.

"Those two are probably going to live together in the church. Elsa's strength and cleverness will get her through the danger, and though I feel bad saying this, Evan will never be a merchant. But…what of us?"

Lawrence thought he heard a small voice, perhaps the sound of Holo inhaling sharply.

"I turned a profit in Kumersun. You learned more of your home. And you will probably learn still more here, and I am helping you. Of course"—here he spoke a bit louder, perceiving that Holo wanted to interrupt—"of course, I'm helping you because I want to. However…"

That which he had been able to avoid thinking about now confronted him.

Having gotten to this point, it would be a lie to say that the situation was impossible to explain.

But doing so would put more distance between them than slapping Holo's hand aside or not trusting her could.

No matter how skillfully one evaded, all debts eventually came due.

"However...what will you do after we reach your home?"

Holo's shadow on the wall became larger, perhaps because of the tail beneath her robe suddenly fluffing up.

But Holo herself seemed to shrink.

"I know not," came her voice, also small.

Lawrence had asked the question he did not want to ask.

He did not want to ask it because he dreaded the answer.

"I'm sure you will not be satisfied with a mere glance at your home."

Returning home after so many centuries gone—the words *it's been a long time* hardly sufficed.

Lawrence didn't have to ask what would happen once they arrived there.

He was filled with regret.

If he hadn't asked the question, the distance between them might well have grown.

And yet—he wished he hadn't asked.

If only Holo would look at him plainly and say, "There we shall say our farewells."

Seeing her so troubled made him feel helpless.

"No, forget it. I am sorry. There is no point in speculation," he said.

This was all pure speculation.

Lawrence's own feelings were conflicted.

Although parting with Holo would bring with it the pain of loss, he felt he would be able to give her up.

When he took a loss in business, he would spend a few days feeling as though it was the end of the world, only to return to working at making money again as though nothing had happened.

But when the act of thinking rationally about the possibility itself filled him with sadness, what then?

He did not know.

"I am Holo the Wisewolf," she murmured, staring at the flickering candle. "I am the Wisewolf of Yoitsu."

Holo rested her chin on her knee, then slowly stood.

Her tail hung limp, as though it was mere decoration.

She looked first at the candle placed on the floor, then at Lawrence.

"I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu," she said, as though the sentence was an incantation. With a quick stride she came to stand directly beside him, then immediately sat down.

Before Lawrence had a chance to say anything, she was lying down on his lap.

"Have you any complaints?" Holo's normal impudence was undeniably godlike.

But this impudence was entirely different.

"None whatsoever," said Lawrence.

Neither tears nor anger nor laughter seemed to quite suit this

delicate situation, which brimmed with tension.

The candle burned soundlessly.

Lawrence casually rested his hand on Holo's shoulder as she lay in his lap.

"I'm going to sleep for a bit. Will you read in my place?"

Her face was hidden by her hair, and Lawrence could not see it.

But he knew full well when her teeth came down on his index finger.

"I shall," he said.

It was like a test of courage—not unlike seeing how close one can bring the point of a knife to a kitten's eye.

A bit of blood welled up from where his finger had been bitten.

He expected Holo would become truly angry unless he actually did some reading.

The only sound was the turning of pages.

Her evasion of the problem had been very forceful, but she had saved herself and Lawrence both.

She truly was a wisewolf.

On this count, Lawrence had no doubts.

Had the church been a monastery, it would have been time for the morning prayers thanking God for creating the new day.

Of course, it was far too early for the morning worship service.

The only sounds were of the turning pages and Holo's soft breathing.

Lawrence couldn't help but feel impressed at the fact that she'd fallen asleep. At the same time, he was a bit relieved that she had.

She had forcibly—so forcibly!—ended the conversation, demanding Lawrence neither say nor ask another thing.

Though she had not answered Lawrence's question, her actions alone were enough.

After all, they made one thing abundantly clear: Holo did not wish to confront the problem any more than Lawrence did.

If she had changed the subject while the true answer to his question lay within her, Lawrence probably would have been angry. But as neither of them had that answer, he was grateful she had ended the conversation by force.

At the very least, this meant she did not have to come up with an answer right then and there.

Their travels were not over, and they had not arrived in Yoitsu yet.

It was the rare debt that was repaid in full before it came due, after all.

As he thought these things over, Lawrence put down the book he was reading and picked up another volume.

Father Franz had evidently been an intelligent fellow. Within the books, even the lineage of the various gods had been carefully organized, and a glance at the title of each chapter gave one a reasonable idea of its contents. This made the books easy to skim. Lawrence shuddered to think of how difficult this task would have been if Father Franz had simply collected tales at random as he heard them.

However, while flipping through the pages of book after book, Lawrence realized something.

In addition to the normal, common tales of snakes, frogs, and fish, there were many stories of mountain, lake, and tree gods. Likewise, there were tales of gods of thunder and rain, sun and moon and stars.

But stories of bird spirits and beast spirits—there were few of those.

In the pagan town of Kumersun, Diana had told many tales that concerned the bear spirit who destroyed Yoitsu. And near the Church city of Ruvinheigen, Lawrence himself had felt the unmistakable presence of a wolf-god not unlike Holo.

And Diana herself was a bird spirit larger than any human.

Given all this, the books should have been filled with beast legends. Yet Lawrence had found not one.

Did the books that they had brought up from the basement simply not happen to contain any such tales?

At that moment, Lawrence's eye fell on a sentence written on a piece of parchment that was tucked into the book he had just opened.

"It is not my wish to regard the tale of the bear spirit in this book with any kind of special treatment."

So far, every book Lawrence had looked through had simply been accounts of the tales Father Franz had heard, written in language as dry as any business contract. Having suddenly come upon this sentence in which he felt he could hear Father Franz's own voice, he was momentarily stunned.

"Regarding the stories in the other books—there are many which differ in time and place, but which I believe nonetheless refer to the same spirit. However, this particular spirit is the only one whose stories I have organized so thoroughly."

Lawrence wavered, trying to decide whether to wake Holo.

He was unable to turn his gaze away from the yellowed page.

Father Franz's handwriting was neat, but at the same time, it seemed somehow excited.

"Is the Pope aware of this? If I am correct, then the God we worship triumphed without a fight. If that is proof of His omnipotence, how could I possibly remain calm?"

It seemed as though he could hear Father Franz's decisive pen strokes.

The passage concluded: "I do not wish to let bias cloud my view of all the tales. Yet I cannot help but wonder if the pagans of the northlands themselves did not realize the importance of the Moon-Hunting Bear. No, perhaps the very fact that I am writing this means that I am already biased. As I assembled these books, I felt strongly the existence of these spirits. If possible, I hope that one would judge not with the narrow mind of a worshipper of our God, but rather with the open heart of those whose love of God is like a zephyr in an open field. That is why I have ventured to leave this book in among all the others."

As soon as Lawrence flipped the piece of parchment over, the book's story began, much like any of the other books he had read.

Should he let Holo read it first? Or should he pretend not to have seen it?

The thought flitted through his mind for a moment, but it was too late for that now—and in any case, it would be a kind of betrayal.

He decided to wake Holo.

He closed the book, whereupon he could hear a strange sound.

Plip, plip, plip-plip came the small, dry sound.

"...Rain, eh?"

But as soon as he said it, he realized the raindrops were awfully

large. Eventually he realized that the sound was of galloping hooves.

It was said that the sound of a galloping horse at night would draw a throng of demons.

When traveling by horse at night, one could never let it run.

Church follower and pagan alike believed this.

But its true meaning was common sense—a galloping horse at night never brought good tidings.

"Hey, wake up." Lawrence closed the book and tapped Holo's shoulder, listening carefully.

Judging by the sound of the hooves, there was a single horse, which entered the village square and came to an abrupt stop.

"Mmph...what is it?"

"I have two things to tell you."

"Neither good, no doubt."

"First, I found the book with stories of the Moon-Hunting Bear."

Holo's eyes widened in an instant, and she looked at the book near Lawrence's side.

But she was not the type to have her whole attention stolen by a single thing.

Her wolf ears flicked smartly, and she looked back at the wall behind them. "Did something happen?"

"That seems very likely. There is nothing less welcome than the sound of a horse's gallop at night."

Lawrence took the book and handed it to Holo.

She took it, but he did not let go.

“I don’t know what you plan to do upon reading this, but whatever thoughts you have, I’d like you to tell me about them.”

Holo did not look up, but gazed evenly at the book. “Hmph,” she replied. “I suppose you could’ve easily hidden this book. Very well. I promise.”

Lawrence nodded as he stood. “I’ll go look outside,” he said, walking away.

Naturally, the church was dark and quiet, though not so dark that Lawrence’s eyes were useless.

Once he arrived in the living room, there was a bit of moonlight filtering in through the cracks of the window, which improved visibility.

He could see well enough to be able to instantly identify the figure that was creaking its way down the stairs as Elsa.

“I heard the sound of a galloping horse,” she said.

“Any notion of what is afoot?”

He expected she did, otherwise she would not have come immediately downstairs.

“More than I’d like.”

A village like Tereo was too small for the hooves to be from a town lookout coming to warn of a mercenary attack.

It probably had something to do with Enberch.

But had the crisis not already passed?

Elsa trotted over to the window and peeked out through the crack as she had no doubt done many times in the past.

Unsurprisingly, the horse seemed to have stopped in front of the village elder's house.

"I only know what I have been able to piece together, but judging from the papers on your desk, Enberch should not be able to strike, should they?" said Lawrence.

"A merchant's eyes are keen indeed. But yes. I believe so myself. However—"

"If you are going to tell me that the situation would be different if I'd betrayed you, I should tie you up immediately."

Unintimidated, Elsa looked sharply at Lawrence.

She soon looked away.

"In any case, I am a traveler. If things go badly, my position becomes very dangerous. There are scores of tales of merchants who became wrapped up in local problems and lost everything."

"So long as I am here, I will not allow anything like that to happen. But please, go and close up the cellar. If there is trouble with Enberch, the village elder will certainly come here."

"And what of the reason we are here so late at night?"

Elsa's cleverness was different than Holo's. Somehow Lawrence felt an affinity with the girl. "...Bring a blanket to the sanctuary."

"Agreed. My companion is a nun, after all. No argument, then?"

Though Lawrence had only wanted to confirm their cover story, Elsa did not reply.

For if she had, she would have been telling a lie.

She was a clergywoman through and through.

"Elder Sem has come out," said Elsa.

“Understood.” Lawrence turned and went to Holo.

In times like these, Holo’s keen ears were quite useful.

She had already returned most of the books to the cellar and put her robes back on.

“Take that one book with you. We’ll hide it behind the altar,” said Lawrence.

Holo nodded, handing the remaining books one by one to Lawrence, who had descended halfway down the stairs to the cellar.

“This should be all of them,” she said.

“Then take the hallway opposite the living room. If you continue around the corner, it should take you to the entrance behind the altar. Head in there, and take the book—”

Holo ran off without waiting to hear the end of the sentence.

Lawrence climbed out of the cellar, replacing the pedestal and putting the statue of the Holy Mother back on top of it.

He was nervous for a moment, unable to find the keyhole in the floor, but he managed to locate it, and after locking up with the brass key Elsa had given him, he gathered up the blanket and went after Holo.

Church construction was very similar the world over.

Just as he had expected, the entrance was there, its doors open.

He trotted down the narrow path that he knew should lead to the altar, protecting the candle flame with his hand. Soon his view expanded.

A few slivers of moonlight slipped past a window on the second floor, enough that Lawrence felt he did not need the candle.

On the other side of the doors that faced the altar he could hear quiet voices.

He motioned with his eyes to Holo—*hurry!*

It could be problematic to explain the key if it was found on them, so he hid it behind the altar as well.

They sat on the floor's only indentation, the place where Father Franz had probably said his prayers for so many years.

Lawrence extinguished the candle and wrapped himself and Holo up in the blanket.

It had been some time since he'd acted so very like a thief outside the door.

Once long ago in a harbor town, he had snuck into a trading company's building with a friend to peek at the company's order ledger.

At the time, he had not yet learned how to judge which goods were in demand. Thinking on the situation now, Lawrence realized it was a terrifying risk to take, although still much less so than what he was doing at this very moment.

After all, nothing he was doing in Tereo would make his coin purse any heavier.

The door opened, and Sem's voice filled the room. "Still, as the village elder, I—"

Lawrence took a deep breath and looked up, dazed as though he had just woken from sleep.

"My apologies for disturbing your holy time in the church," said Sem.

Behind him were Elsa and another villager wielding a wooden

stave.

“Did something…happen?” Lawrence asked.

“I hope that as someone who has traveled much, you will understand. We may cause you some inconvenience for a time. Please bear with us.”

The villager wielding the staff took a step forward. Lawrence noted this and stood.

“I am a merchant who belongs to the Rowen Trade Guild. Many people in the guild’s house in Kumersun are aware that I have come to this village.”

The villager looked back at Sem, surprised.

If trouble was to arise with a trade guild, a village the size of Tereo could not hope to escape unscathed.

In terms of financial strength, a merchant guild was like a nation.

“Of course, Elder Sem, so long as you are taking appropriate actions as the representative of the village, then as a traveler I will certainly abide by them.”

“…I understand. But the reason I appear before you and your companion is not out of any malice, I assure you.”

“What has happened?”

The patter of more footsteps was heard; Evan had probably awoken.

Sem glanced in the direction of the footfalls, then looked back. He spoke slowly.

“Someone in Enberch has eaten the wheat of this village and died.”

Chapter Four



Chapter Four

The first thing that came to Lawrence's mind was a poisonous wheat known as Ridelius's Hellfire.

If eaten, it rotted a victim's limbs from the inside, and he or she would die screaming in agony. Even a small amount would cause terrible hallucinations and force a pregnant woman to miscarry.

The wheat was believed to come from demons who added fake black wheat to normal ears of wheat, and if it went unnoticed during the harvest and was ground into flour, it would become impossible to find.

No one would know the wheat was poison until someone ate it and developed symptoms.

To a farming village that raised wheat, its appearance was a calamity as bad as drought or flood.

The truly frightening thing about the wheat was not the suffering and death that it caused.

What made it so terrible was that when Ridelius's Hellfire was discovered in a year's harvest, none of the harvest could be eaten.

"And no one from our village has been poisoned?" asked Sem.

"I don't think so, Elder. Grandma Jean is sick in bed, but it's just a cold," said a villager.

"The new wheat was used only to bake bread for the harvest festival, right? So at least we know the wheat we ground before that is safe."

The large, flat rock in the village square seemed to be the place where the villagers met to discuss important matters.

The fire burned red as the sleepy-faced villagers rubbed their eyes and watched their leaders voice various opinions.

"Hakim said that a shoemaker ate bread made from wheat he bought from Riendott, then died. His limbs turned purple, and he suffered greatly. The Enberch Council soon found out that it was made with wheat from our village. Hakim rode back to Tereo right away, so he doesn't know what happened after that, but we can guess. The feudal lord, Duke Badon, is sure to send a messenger to ensure the return of the wheat. We can expect an official envoy from Enberch at dawn, no doubt."

"R-return the wheat…That means…"

At the innkeeper's murmur, all gathered there in the circle fell silent.

It was Iima who finally spoke. She was one of the few women who had joined the gathering at the stone.

"It means we'll have to return the money. Isn't that right, Elder Sem?"

"…Yes."

The villagers went pale at the pronouncement, clutching their heads.

Money used was money gone.

And most of the villagers did not seem likely to have been carefully saving their earnings.

There were a few, though, who did not clutch their heads in dread—Elder Sem, bar mistress Iima, and Elsa, along with the man who had delivered the letter to Sem during Lawrence's first visit. And Lawrence

and Holo, of course.

It was not because these people had savings or were especially brave, but rather because they were all capable of rationally thinking about the problem.

Seen from outside, it was a simple scenario to understand.

This wheat crisis was a play directed by Enberch.

"Elder, whatever shall we do? We've used the money to buy pigs and chickens and to repair our scythes and plows!"

"That's hardly the whole of it. This year's harvest was abundant, so our tavern laid in fine food and drink. If our money went into such purchases, that means yours did as well," said Iima.

All who had drunk too much the night before now unavoidably hung their heads in regret.

Iima's words only deepened their shame. She turned to Sem. "But, Elder—that's not the only problem, is it?" Iima, the woman who had hauled a brewing pot about on her back, selling her ale as she traveled, was an imposing figure indeed.

"Indeed not. Once poison wheat is mixed in with the real wheat, the whole harvest is lost. This year's harvest was great—but last year's was not."

Once wheat had been sown and harvested, bringing in triple the sown amount was acceptable. Quadrupling the amount was an excellent harvest. Once the next year's seed grain was removed, the amount set aside in case of a poor harvest was limited.

It was possible that the villagers had already eaten last year's reserve, having counted on this year's good harvest.

In any case, the village's food supply was in dire straits.

And they had no money with which to buy new wheat.

"What shall we do? Poverty is bearable but not starvation!"

"Indeed. However, I—" Sem was going to continue speaking, but he was interrupted when a man next to the innkeeper stood suddenly and pointed at Lawrence and Holo.

"They're the ones who mixed poison wheat in with the harvest! I asked him, and he admitted to bringing wheat in! He's here to ruin our harvest and then force us to buy his wheat!"

Lawrence had imagined this would happen.

He also knew that Sem had not brought him and Holo to the square out of malice.

The elder had known there was a good possibility that if Lawrence and Holo were absent, the villagers would take weapons in hand and go searching for them with suspicion and doubt in their hearts.

"Th-that must be it! He went to Evan's all alone to grind his wheat! No, Evan's in it with him, and they're trying to destroy the village!"

"Aye, it's Evan! Where did that lying miller scum go? Let's tie them up together and make them tell us which wheat they poisoned!"

The villagers stood up one after another, ready to pounce on Lawrence.

Suddenly Elsa took a step forward and spoke. "Please wait."

"This is no time for women to interrupt. Get back!"

"Excuse me?" Iima now stood beside Elsa; she was fully three times the size of the smaller girl. The men cringed, their spirits somewhat cowed.

Elder Sem cleared his throat as if to settle things for a moment. "Evan is in the church. We can assign blame later. What is important

right now is the wheat that may be returned and the money they're sure to ask for."

"We can't pay with money we don't have! We'll have to ask them to wait until next…"

"If only it were so simple."

The men were stunned at the elder's words. "Elder, what…what do you mean?"

"Enberch will surely use this as an opportunity to restore the old arrangement," he said.

"Surely not…"

The faces of the older men among the gathering were full of bitterness.

"What are you saying, Elder? Enberch isn't allowed to do anything to this village! Father Franz has already made it so!"

Lawrence didn't know whether Sem had not explained the nature of Enberch's relationship to the village or whether the men simply didn't want to understand it, but he soon found out.

"Anyway, we should never have allowed Elsa to inherit Father Franz's position! Enberch will never respect that!"

"Quite so! She spends all day in that church, never once coming out to work the fields—though she eats her share of bread, 'tis sure. Everyone knows it was thanks to Lord Truyeo's blessings that the harvest was so good this year. How could some church girl—"

"Enough!" said Sem.

Uncertainty only fanned the flames of discontent.

They burned from the driest, most flammable places, then spread from there.

It was easy for Lawrence to imagine how hard the serious Elsa had worked to preserve Father Franz's legacy.

Having cooperated with her, Sem would likewise have understood.

But it was all too plain from the villagers' words how they regarded the girl.

Lawrence noticed Elsa's clenched fists and her expressionless face.

"What shall we do, Elder?" someone asked.

"In any case, each of us must check to see how much harvest money we have yet, as well as how many provisions we've laid in for winter. Until the Enberch messenger arrives, we don't know what they'll demand. They may arrive as soon as daybreak. We should adjourn until then—each of you go now, and check as I've told you to."

Though the men's sighs were heavy and dissatisfied, they reluctantly stood.

The gazes that Lawrence and Elsa endured as the men left the meeting stone were full of resentment.

Though the villagers were unreasonable, it was fortunate that Elder Sem seemed to be their ally.

If Sem had been their enemy, then Lawrence would have had no choice but to ask for Holo's help.

As the villagers dispersed, Sem approached Elsa, his staff in hand. "Elsa, I know this is hard but please endure."

Elsa nodded silently. Sem next turned to Iima.

"Iima, please go with Elsa to the church. The angriest ones may attempt to break in."

"You can count on me," said Iima.

Lawrence immediately understood the power relationships within the village.

But where did that leave him and Holo?

"Mr. Lawrence," Sem finally said, turning to face him. "Like the other villagers, I have my doubts about you. The timing is too coincidental. However, I hope you would not think me such a fool that I would immediately jump to a conclusion."

"Were I in your place, Elder Sem, I would say the same thing," replied Lawrence.

His old age made his brow constantly wrinkled, but he seemed slightly relieved. "Both for your own safety and to prevent suspicions from growing still deeper, I'm afraid I will have to ask you to come to my house."

Holo and Lawrence were fortunate that he didn't simply tie them up without any explanation. If they had resisted, it seemed to Lawrence that bloodshed would soon have followed.

He nodded cooperatively and walked toward Sem's house behind Sem and the villagers.

"Y'know, there's a locked cell somewhere in that village," the rumor would go once everyone's tongues were sufficiently loosened by wine.

It happened after the merchant in question had drunk too much and told all of his tales of profit.

Once he was told of more money to be made, he was all too happy to follow the villagers into the elder's house, only to be locked in a cell, never to escape.

As long as none of the villagers spoke of the event, no one would ever know what happened to the merchant.

His belongings were all sold off, and the merchant himself was

offered up as a sacrifice for a good harvest.

Strangely, rumors like these seemed to be more common around wealthier villages.

Fortunately, it did not seem like the sort of thing that was likely to happen in Tereo.

The room into which Lawrence and Holo were shown was quite ordinary. It was right next to the one in which Lawrence and Sem had spoken when the merchant first arrived in the village.

The door had no lock, and it seemed that if Holo and Lawrence needed to force their way out, it would not be impossible.

If they had to come up with a plan, this place was as good as any.

“What do you think?” asked Lawrence.

The two sat opposite each other on benches separated by a low table in the center of the room. He spoke softly so as not to be heard by the guard that was no doubt just outside the door.

“I should’ve given up on looking for the book and left the village with you,” came Holo’s uncharacteristically glum reply.

However, her face did not look especially guilty nor did it show much regret.

She focused on one particular spot, her mind furiously working.

“It’s not clear that would actually have changed anything. Let’s say that we came in to ask after the abbey’s location and left the same day. That would’ve been the day before yesterday. Then the news of Enberch’s poisoned wheat reaches the village today. Obviously they would assume that someone malicious mixed the poison wheat in with the good. And who do you think they would then blame? Us,” said Lawrence.

“There are no other groups made up of a foolish merchant and a beautiful maiden. They’d soon catch us on horseback,” added Holo.

Lawrence winced at Holo’s bitter words, but then again, breaking down into sobs of self-recrimination was not exactly Holo’s style.

“As soon as we set foot in this village, it was inevitable that we would be suspected of poisoning the wheat. Demons bringing calamity always come from without, after all.”

“And there’s nothing we can say to prove our innocence.”

Lawrence nodded.

Whether a demon or a malicious human poisoned the wheat was irrelevant—when calamity occurred, people needed something to blame.

It was not that demons were responsible for wrongdoing, but rather that when something bad happened, demons were blamed.

“The circumstances are too perfect. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that this is a move by Enberch to gain control of Tereo. Everyone in the region must be aware of the tax dispute between the two. If Tereo’s wheat suddenly turns up poisoned, Enberch is going to be the obvious suspect. Tereo has people supporting it, and those people would surely not keep silent. So Enberch needs someone else to blame. Then we just happened to show up, which gave them the perfect opportunity to execute their plan.”

If this was all true, Lawrence had a good notion of what lay at the end of it.

“Then when they hold their negotiations with the village, they’ll offer the condition of delayed payment so long as the villagers find the person responsible.”

Thus Enberch would both be able to convince its neighbors that this

was not Enberch's own doing and to bring Tereo under its control while Lawrence and Holo evaporated like so much dew on the executioner's block.

"Enberch won't want to get in trouble with our trade guild, so they certainly won't have a trial to determine our guilt. They'll simply declare us guilty and execute us, promising to lower Tereo's debt so long as the villagers of Tereo keep quiet about who we were and where we came from, and that would be that."

Holo sighed and bit her thumbnail. "And you're content with that?"

"Of course not." Lawrence laughed and shrugged, but admittedly he did not know what they should do to extricate themselves from the situation.

"If we run, they'll be certain to think it was us who poisoned the wheat, and if your face is then posted everywhere, you won't be able to do business," said Holo.

"It would be the end of my life as a merchant, yes."

So what to do?

Holo seemed to suddenly realize something and spoke. "Hm. Ah, could you not seek help with the guild you're a member of?"

"Help, huh. If I could do that I…ah. Hm." Lawrence tapped on his own head. Holo peered at him uncertainly.

"Wait—*you're* here," he finally said.

"What do you mean?"

"Something good. If I was riding on your back, could we escape to another town faster than on horseback?"

"Certainly."

"This isn't long-distance trading, and in any case, the only thing

faster than a horse is a ship. The net Enberch would throw out to catch us can only extend at the speed a horse can run. Which means —"

Holo sniffed slightly through her nose. It was hard to know if it was a small sigh or a reply.

"I was thinking that if I was traveling with you in the cart, we'd never be able to contact a guild house before they caught us. But if we can make it to the guild, we can get some measure of protection. If news of a guild member using poisoned wheat to do business got around, it would be a disaster—so they'll do whatever they can to put a stop to it.

"If the people trying to trap us are thinking similarly, they may give up the chase as soon as they see we've escaped.

"However—"

Lawrence's pleasure at seeing a way out of the situation was short-lived; soon he saw its inevitable conclusion.

"But after that, who do you think will be accused of being the culprit?" he asked.

There was no need to ask. It would obviously be the person that all the villagers knew was a liar, the one who they had always regarded with suspicion and whose occupation afforded him the perfect opportunity to poison the wheat: Evan the miller.

Holo was quick to grasp what Lawrence was getting at.

She put on an annoyed expression. "Fine then, let him ride on my back as well. He wants to see the outside world anyway, yes? I won't refuse him. If the girl's in danger, put her on as well. You *are* absurdly softhearted, after all—honestly, the trouble I'm put through on your account...," she said, as though already having given up trying to protest.

With Lawrence and Evan gone, Enberch would have no one to point to as the culprit.

Not only that, but with both of them gone, Enberch would have to claim to surrounding towns that Evan was the criminal and that he had fled because he was guilty. There would be no need to go after Lawrence since doing so risked trouble with his guild.

"The trouble, though, is that you'll have to reveal your true form," said Lawrence.

Holo gave an incredulous smile, miffed at being underestimated. "I am not so narrow-minded as to be worried about that. 'Tis true, though…Being feared does wound my fragile heart."

There was a hint of accusation in Holo's eyes, perhaps at the memory of Lawrence's fear when he had first seen her wolf form in the sewers of Pazzio.

But she soon bit her lower lip mischievously, flashing her fangs slightly, and said, "Or is it simply that you wish to be the only person who knows my secret?"

At a loss for words, Lawrence cleared his throat.

Holo chuckled throatily. "If this is what you wish to do, I do not mind."

It was unavoidable. He couldn't think of another way out of the predicament. "It's the worst-case solution, of course, but the chances of it turning out like this are very high. It would be a shame to leave behind the horse, wagon, and cargo, but there's nothing for it but to think of them as fallen into a deep valley."

"I suppose I don't mind being your new wagon."

It was a clever jest.

"Oh? I'd like to see the cart horse that holds its own reins."

Just as Holo flashed her invincible smile, there was a knock at the door.

The door opened to reveal Sem.

The crisis that the village faced seemed too heavy a burden for his aged body.

Though it was probably an effect of the light coming from the candles that hung from the ceiling, he seemed to have become even more haggard looking.

“Might I have a word with you?” he asked.

It did not seem likely that he had heard Lawrence’s hushed exchange with Holo.

After all, Holo would not have let her guard down and spoken if that was a possibility.

“Yes, we were just hoping to speak to you,” said Lawrence.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” said Sem, holding himself up on his staff and entering the room. A villager stood behind him, guarding the door.

Perhaps unused to the prospect of violence, the villager was obviously nervous.

“Please close the door,” said Sem. The villager’s eyes widened in surprise, but he grudgingly did as he was told and closed the door.

It was obvious that he believed Lawrence and Holo were guilty.

“Well, then,” said Sem, placing the candle he held on the table. “Who exactly are you two, then?”

He certainly got right to the point.

Lawrence flashed his merchant's smile. "We are nobody of note, I should say. I have already told you who I am."

"Yes, you have indeed told me who you are. Though I have not yet confirmed it, I do believe you."

Sem's gaze moved from Lawrence to Holo.

Holo looked down silently, her head covered by her hood.

It almost appeared as though she were sleeping.

"You were asking after Diendran Abbey. What business do you have there?"

Sem had conceded that the abbey existed. This was progress.

When Lawrence had originally inquired about the abbey's whereabouts, Sem had pretended not to know anything about it.

What he wanted now was to ascertain whether Lawrence and Holo were from Enberch.

But what would he do after gaining that knowledge?

"A person I met in Kumersun told me of the abbot of Diendran Abbey. To be precise, she did not tell me but rather my companion."

It was Sem's greatest fear that Lawrence and Holo had been sent from Enberch.

But it seemed that he did not have the patience for subtle questions that would draw out the truth.

He took a deep, wheezy breath, his eyes imploring. "Did you not come here on the orders of Enberch? If you did, how much—how much did they pay you?"

"We did come through Enberch, but it was only one stop on our travels. It is for our own goals that we sought out Diendran Abbey."

“Enough lies!” shouted Sem hoarsely, leaning forward, his expression almost monstrous in the candlelight.

“We have nothing to do with the dispute between Enberch and Tereo. I only understood the problem by putting together things I heard at your tavern, things I learned by talking to Evan and Miss Elsa, and my own experience,” said Lawrence.

Sem feared the possibility that Lawrence and Holo were spies from Enberch.

The poison wheat problem did not center around heresy and the Church—it was about money.

Depending on the negotiations, the village was not necessarily doomed.

But if the Church got involved, it would not be so simple.

“A-are…are you truly not from Enberch?” Sem himself was probably aware that no answer they gave would fully convince him.

But he had to ask, and Lawrence could only answer one way.

“We are truly not.”

Sem looked down, his face a mask of suffering, as though he had swallowed a red-hot ingot of iron. Even sitting, he had to support his body with his staff.

He raised his head slowly. “If that is true…”

No doubt by now Sem knew the villagers’ financial situation.

Lawrence thought this over, and this was immediately clear that if all the wheat was returned, the village would fall into ruin.

This meant the profit that came once every half a year—perhaps only once a year—would vanish in an instant.

“If that is true…might you lend us your wisdom…and your money?”

Holo moved slightly.

She might have remembered Lawrence having to beg for loans in Ruvinheigen.

He’d been caught in a trap and had to frantically run around borrowing money.

At the time, he had felt like a drowning man, trying to breathe even if it meant inhaling water.

But Lawrence was a merchant.

“I can lend you my wisdom. However—”

“I would not ask you to provide it free of charge,” said Sem.

Lawrence met Sem’s keen eyes.

He did not imagine that Tereo had much to offer him by way of compensation.

There were only a few possibilities.

“In exchange, I will guarantee your safety,” said Sem.

Tereo might have been a small village, but it was a community and Sem was its leader.

In a poor village, a merchant’s coin was powerful.

But against the scythes and hoes of angry villagers, a merchant was helpless.

“Is that a threat?”

“The reason I did not simply have you bound on the spot was

because you first came to greet me with wheat," said Sem.

He was quite adroit.

Lawrence did not feel that arguing would improve his situation.

Besides, he had already conferred with Holo; he knew his course of action. Cooperating with Sem would make everything easier.

"I suppose I have no choice but to agree."

"..."

"However"—Lawrence straightened up and looked Sem in the eye —"should I succeed in turning the situation around, I will ask for appropriate compensation."

Lawrence was neither begging for his life nor asking to be left some small portion of his own money, but rather making demands of remuneration. Sem seemed momentarily stunned but soon came to himself.

Perhaps he thought Lawrence's self-confidence was warranted.

Or perhaps he simply wanted to believe as much.

But the truth was that Lawrence lied in order to win Sem's trust.

He wanted to get away from this village as peaceably as possible. Thus the best course of action was to wait for the messenger from Enberch to arrive, and then Lawrence would see for himself what Tereo's fate would be.

Assuming that Enberch wished to take control of Tereo as easily as possible, it was unlikely that the townspeople would have investigated whether the poisoned wheat had occurred naturally or was the result of foul play.

They would probably leave the mystery unsolved.

“Very well. Tell me all the details,” said Lawrence to Sem. Maybe by some miracle they could turn the situation around.

The more of the story Lawrence heard from Sem, the worse it got.

The contract Father Franz had negotiated with Enberch was unlike anything Lawrence had ever heard of, beginning with the stipulation that Tereo could simply name its selling price and amount when selling wheat to Enberch.

But looking at the books that Father Franz had assembled in the church’s cellar, it was easy to imagine that he had powerful supporters somewhere.

Bound in leather and reinforced at all four corners with iron, each volume would have cost a fortune.

Based on the letters that Lawrence had spied on Elsa’s desk, Father Franz had been personally acquainted with the duke of a nearby border region, as well as the bishop of a very large bishopric.

Though he was suspected of heresy time and time again, Father Franz had been able to live out his days peacefully, no doubt because of his powerful connections. Like the ropes that are woven together to create a net, the bonds between people could be a source of great strength.

Sem claimed not to know how Father Franz had imposed the contract on Enberch, which was probably true.

He speculated that Father Franz had learned something damaging about Duke Badon, the ruler of Enberch, which seemed likely.

Father Franz had certainly been a remarkable man.

However, this was no time to waste breath singing the praises of the deceased.

If Lawrence could find a way to solve the village’s problem, it

would be good business for him, so he wanted to give the matter serious thought.

The extravagance with which the villagers squandered Father Franz's legacy was nothing short of tragic.

Even if Lawrence were to hand over all his gold and silver in the village's name, the money would make little difference.

It was clear that if all the wheat was returned, the village would be ruined.

But nothing would come from such thoughts. Lawrence offered the only possibility he could think of.

"Properly speaking, Enberch will want to purchase wheat from next year's harvest to make up for whatever they're left owing now."

"...Which means?"

"It means that they'll set a price now for the purchase of all the wheat from your fields next year."

Sem did not even understand the idea of green harvesting—it was obvious how long the village had been free of worry.

"I-if that is possible, then we would have a reprieve, for the nonce—"

"But the buying party has the advantage. As they are paying for something that does not yet exist, it is only favorable to them if they're given a significant discount. And once the price is agreed upon, no matter how large the harvest, you must still sell it all at that price."

"B-but that's absurd."

"So even if next year's harvest is as abundant as this year's, your income will drop so you will have to speculatively sell wheat from the

following year to make up the difference, which means your third year's income will be even lower. They may even take advantage of your weakness to cancel the deal in case of a poor harvest. I'm sure you understand what would happen after that."

It was for this reason that villagers normally spent so much time on side jobs during the winter.

They had to save money to prevent others from stealing their land.

"I always thought that all would be well so long as we avoided taxation…That is why I tried so hard to guard what Father Franz left us."

"You were not mistaken. However, the villagers did not understand how great the gift of Father Franz's legacy was."

"I see…I know it is too late for such talk, but when Father Franz first arrived, he asked to stay at the church in exchange for his improving relations with Enberch. Though we had a church in our village, we could not abandon our faith in the ancient guardian of the land, Lord Truyeo. Father Franz claimed not to care about that, and he was never involved in any proselytizing. He simply lived in the church."

The villagers had probably thought of Father Franz as a blessing sent to them by Lord Truyeo.

"I can't believe it has come to this," said Sem finally.

"Elder Sem, surely you saw the potential for this to happen, did you not?" asked Lawrence bluntly.

Sem's face went blank, and he closed his eyes, sighing. "I suppose… I did. But to think that Khepas liquor would turn up…"

"Khepas liquor?"

"Ah, yes, that is what we call the poison wheat. It is made from rye,

and we all know of it—I cannot imagine that any from the village would be so careless as to mix it with wheat at sufficient purity to kill a man."

Lawrence agreed. "So it will be assumed that someone did it intentionally," he said.

"The villagers will blame the traveler since outsiders are always the subject of suspicion," said Sem.

"And after that, Evan the miller."

Sem nodded and then nodded again. "I spoke with Elsa a moment ago, and she believes Enberch to be responsible. I am pathetic. I believed that so long as we could raise wheat and sell it easily, we would have peace. I thought of nothing else."

"When the messenger from Enberch arrives, it will be clear whether this is all their doing or not. If possible, I would like to speak to Elsa before then," said Lawrence.

All of the advice Lawrence had given Sem was simply a setup to deliver this line.

"Understood." Sem stood and opened the door, giving the villager there some brief instructions. He then turned to Lawrence. "This man will take you to her."

Sem clung to his staff as he moved aside for Lawrence and Holo to pass.

"Embarrassingly this has taken…a toll on this old body of mine. Please tell me what you learn later."

The villager hastily pushed forth from the chair he had been sitting on. Sem sat on it now, pain in his features.

Though it was convenient that Sem would not be following them to the church, he was also the one who could protect Holo and

Lawrence from the ire of the villagers.

Lawrence certainly hoped that this would all be resolved peacefully.

He would feel bad if Sem were to collapse now, so he left the man with some kind words before leaving his house.

The fire in the village square still burned brightly with small groups of villagers gathered here and there talking.

As soon as Lawrence and Holo emerged from the elder's house, the villagers' eyes all fell upon them.

"Well, *that's* certainly unpleasant," muttered Holo.

If the villager leading them to the Church was to betray them, Lawrence and Holo would almost certainly be beaten and hanged by the angry mob.

It was an incredibly delicate situation.

Though the church was but a short distance away, it seemed very far indeed now.

"Iima—the elder sent us." They had finally reached the church, whereupon the villager knocked on the door and announced himself quite loudly.

No doubt the loud voice was also to announce to the surrounding villagers that he was leading the two travelers on the elder's orders.

What a villager feared above all was to be singled out by his fellow villagers.

Soon the church door opened, and Iima invited Lawrence and Holo inside. The villager that was their escort seemed visibly relieved, his shoulders sagging.

The hate-filled gazes that Lawrence and Holo endured were dyed red by the firelight, but now the closing church door blocked them

out.

It was a magnificent door, but Lawrence was not sure how it would hold up against anything but hateful gazes.

“The elder sent you, then? What is it?” Though she had let them into the church, Iima blocked their path, not letting them enter any farther.

“I need to speak with Miss Elsa.”

“With Elsa?” asked Iima, her eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Sem guaranteed my safety in exchange for my wisdom and coin. But to make that wisdom and coin as effective as possible, I need accurate information. I believe Miss Elsa has a better understanding of the situation than Sem does.”

Lawrence expected that Iima, who had lived and traveled alone, would have some sympathy for him and Holo and the unreasonable situation they now found themselves in.

Whether or not that hope was clear to her, she gestured with her chin in the direction of the living room. “She’s in there; follow me,” said Iima, heading into the church.

Holo was still looking into the sanctuary.

Had Lawrence not been there, she would have long since forced her way into the church, and once she had the book clenched between her wolf teeth, Holo would have run for the horizon.

To the left of the sanctuary were the priestly offices and study.

Candlelight shone from around the corner at the end of the hallway, and when the group rounded it, they found Evan.

He stood there before the door to the living room, ax in hand. It was not hard to guess why he was there.

When he noticed Lawrence and Holo, he was at first surprised before his face settled into a more complicated expression.

There were two people in the village who were suspected of poisoning the wheat. Evan, of course, knew it wasn't himself, so that left only one person to suspect. He was, though, one of the few people who could see the path that all the village's wheat took.

Perhaps he knew there was no chance Lawrence could have poisoned it.

"Elsa is here, correct?"

"Ah, yes, but—"

"The elder's already given permission. Elsa! Elsa!" said Iima as she shoved past Evan.

The blade of the ax Evan held was rusted, and the handle looked as though it had been eaten away by termites.

Lawrence could understand what would make Evan grab such a weapon and stand in front of the door like that.

After all, Lawrence himself had stood in front of Holo, exhausted and beaten up, to protect her in the sewers beneath Pazzio.

"What is it?" asked Elsa.

"You've got guests."

"Huh? Oh—"

"We've come to speak with you," said Lawrence.

Elsa's expression was somehow even more neutral than it had been when he'd visited the church before. "Very well, come in—"

Iima raised her voice. "Elsa."

Elsa was just about to retreat into the room when she turned around at Iima's voice.

"Is it really all right?" Iima asked.

No doubt she was referring to Lawrence and Holo.

Lawrence was not at all confident in his ability to best Iima in a scuffle. He considered it as she gave him an unintimidated glance.

Evan swallowed hard and looked on.

"We cannot depend upon them, but we can trust them," said Elsa. "After all, they do at least know how to pray."

This was just the kind of sarcasm that Holo liked. Lawrence noticed that Elsa herself wore a slight smile.

Beneath her hood, Holo's expression suggested that she had no time for dealing with unimportant people—but what actually irritated her was no doubt that she wished to retort but could not.

"Fine. Evan, boy—you protect her, you hear?" ordered Iima, slapping Evan's shoulder and walking back down the hallway.

It spoke well of Iima that she did not insist upon being included in the conversation.

So long as she was around, Evan and Elsa would feel secure.

"I apologize for the interruption," said Lawrence, entering the room with Holo behind him.

Evan, ax in hand, was about to follow them, but Elsa stopped him. "You wait outside."

"What? Why?"

"Please."

Evan's reluctance was understandable. He nodded grudgingly after Elsa asked again but still seemed dissatisfied.

Lawrence untied the coin purse that was fixed at his waist and held it out to Evan. "Any merchant would weep if he lost his coin purse. I'm leaving it with you. Think of it as proof that you can trust me."

The coin purse contained only his cash on hand, so it was not a great deal of money to Lawrence, but Evan took hold of the bag like it was glowing hot, looking back and forth between the purse and Lawrence's face, his expression on the verge of tears.

"I'll leave it in your care, then," finished Lawrence.

Evan nodded and took a step back.

Elsa closed the door, then looked back into the room.

"Quite an excellent performance. If Enberch was as skilled as you, we would have no choice but to surrender," she said with a sigh.

"Do you doubt us?"

"If you were from Enberch, then it would be Church elders coming to the village, not a wagon loaded with wheat."

Elsa stepped away from the door and sat in a chair, gesturing perfunctorily for Lawrence and Holo to do the same. She massaged her temples, as though suffering from a truly awful headache.

She continued. "Besides, it's even harder to believe you came here to poison the wheat than it is to believe you've come in search of heresy."

"By which you mean...?"

"Hmph. While Elder Sem still doubts you, all this...all this is clearly Enberch's doing. I just never imagined it would come to this."

"Father Franz passed away this past summer, correct? It's hard to

have poison wheat ready in a mere six months. Anywhere you go, Ridelius's Hellfire—er, I mean Khepas liquor—is hidden and disposed of as soon as it appears," said Lawrence.

If Enberch had prepared the poison wheat long ago and never put the plan into action, it was probably because no conveniently unseasonable travelers to foist the blame on had come through Enberch into Tereo until now.

Thinking about this rationally, the townspeople had probably also feared Father Franz.

By the same token, however, they had likewise no doubt decided that they could safely act against Elsa.

"The village's financial state is hopeless. I would very much like to ask for aid from my supporters, but they are all of them only supporting me because of my father's legacy. It is all I can do to convince them to continue that support. If I ask for more, I risk losing what I have," said Elsa.

"...Undoubtedly." Lawrence cleared his throat. "So, Miss Elsa—what do you think will become of us now?"

A typical clergyman would tell him that as long as he trusted in God's grace, there was no need to worry, that God knew the truth.

A smile played at the corners of Elsa's mouth. "Are you asking *me*?" she inquired quietly.

"The ones who can best tell me how Enberch's play will end are you and Iima."

"As well as the two of you, don't you agree?"

Elsa clearly did not want to say it herself.

On the matter of what sorts of demands Enberch's messenger would bring and who would be taken back to Enberch in exchange

for the wheat, Lawrence and Elsa were likely of one mind.

Lawrence nodded, then looked at Holo next to him.

Beneath her hood, she looked sleepy.

She was well aware of what her role would soon be, so she seemed to be saying, “Let me rest until then.”

Lawrence suddenly looked back at Elsa. “We are planning to escape,” he said casually.

Elsa was unmoved. If anything, her face betrayed displeasure, as if she were dealing with a particularly dense and slow child. “I believe the time for escape has long passed.”

“Do you think Enberch already has the road under watch?”

“That may well be. If they have indeed planned all of this, then they would need you two as well.”

Elsa’s opinion reinforced Lawrence’s—which meant the same problem troubled both of them.

“The village’s suspicion is aimed at you and Evan. It will be difficult to defend yourselves. Yet if you run, it will be the same as admitting your guilt,” said Lawrence.

Had Elsa been a bit older and a man, she would have been able to easily inherit Father Franz’s great legacy, Lawrence felt.

“Regardless, even if the two of you managed to escape on horseback, you might not even make it past the villagers.”

“If my companion were merely the maiden she looks to be, that would be true.”

Lawrence got the sense that Holo’s ears twitched, perhaps due to her irritation at Elsa’s gaze.

“Speaking in terms of outcomes, we can escape. We can escape whenever we wish,” he said.

“Then…why aren’t you?”

Lawrence nodded. “First, we have not yet read through all the books in the cellar. Also, if we run, who do you think would be next in line to receive the villagers’ ire?”

Elsa did not so much as swallow.

Her quick, logical mind had already led her to that conclusion, and she already seemed to have been prepared to face it.

“I do not know how you plan to escape, but do you have confidence that you can take Evan with you?”

“Not only him, but you as well.”

For the first time, Elsa smiled. “Ridiculous,” it seemed to say. “I will neither impede nor encourage your escape. As a villager, I cannot allow you to run as you are still the most suspicious party. But as a follower of the Church, I cannot allow you to be unjustly condemned and would hope for your successful flight.”

She must have thought Lawrence was cornered and speaking nonsense—thus the strange carelessness of her manner.

“In any case, regarding your first point, I have no reason to refuse you at this late hour. I would like to let you finish reading the books…,” she continued.

“At this point, there’s but a single volume we’d like to see.”

Holo shifted and said, “’Tis directly behind the altar. I’d like to read just that book…given the situation. I will not ask for more.”

Elsa closed her eyes slowly, seeming to come to a decision. She may have decided to grant some grace to people who she felt would soon

be dead.

She stood and opened the door.

“Wh-whoa!”

“Eavesdropping brings punishment,” said Elsa.

“Er, no, I didn’t mean to—”

“Honestly. It matters not either way. There is a book hidden behind the altar. Go fetch it, please.”

The discussion that had just taken place was not a loud one, so Lawrence was not sure whether Evan had heard it.

Evan hesitated for a moment but soon ran off down the hallway.

Elsa watched him go and seemed to murmur something under her breath, but Lawrence couldn’t catch what it was.

It might have been “If we could escape,” but before he could ask Holo, Elsa turned back to face him.

“I will not try to stop you from escaping. However”—she was every inch the noble clergywoman—“until you do, would you lend us your wisdom? There are none in this village who know well the ways of coin.”

Naturally Lawrence nodded. “I will, though I cannot guarantee that you will find my answers satisfying.”

Elsa blinked in surprise, then gave the same small smile she seemed to use on Evan. “It seems you merchants quite enjoy that line.”

“We are a careful lot,” said Lawrence, whereupon Holo stepped on his foot.

“I’ve brought the book.”

Evan must have found the book easily. He'd returned faster than Lawrence had expected.

"But...isn't this one of the books of pagan legends? Why do you need it?" Evan asked.

Holo walked over to him and took—no, snatched—the book from him.

The contents of the book were something so important that Father Franz had been careful to record them impartially. Holo had no time for Evan's questions.

Lawrence answered for her. "When one gets old, the ancient tales get more interesting."

"Huh?" grunted Evan cluelessly.

Holo walked right past him and into the hallway.

It was obvious that she didn't want to read the book while others looked on. Lawrence had Elsa light a candle for him, then placed it on a sconce, and followed after Holo.

When he arrived in the rear of the sanctuary, he found Holo crouched down, holding her knees like a scolded child.

"No matter how good your eyes are, you can't read in the dark."

She hugged the book, trembling faintly.

Just when Lawrence wondered if she was crying, she looked up slowly. Her face betrayed no hint of weakness.

"Listen, you," she began. "If I destroy this book in anger, will you make amends?"

She was not jesting. This was much more Holo-like than any tears would be.

Lawrence sighed and shrugged. “I don’t mind paying for it, but don’t tear pages out to dry your eyes.” He felt it was a fairly good line.

Holo grinned, showing her fangs as she looked up. “You’d happily buy my tears at a high price, though. ’Twould be a shame not to cry them.”

“There are many counterfeit gems in the world. I’d hate to purchase a fake.”

It was their usual banter.

They both laughed at the absurdity of it.

“Will you leave me alone for a while to read?” she asked.

“I shall. But tell me your thoughts when you’re finished.”

If possible, Lawrence wanted to be at her side as she read.

Saying so, however, risked her anger.

Worrying about someone was the same as not trusting them.

Holo was a proud wisewolf. Lawrence could plainly see that treating her like a delicate, weeping maiden would bring furious reprisals.

He would worry about her when she called upon him to do so.

Leaving Holo to her reading, he said no more, nor did he look back. Holo took a deep breath as though she had already forgotten his presence.

The next moment, he heard a decisive page flip.

As he walked down the dim hallway, Lawrence tapped his head with his closed fist, trying to think about something else.

Elsa had not given up on trying to restore the village’s position. If

the knowledge and experience Lawrence possessed could be of any help, he would lend it.

Also, in the back of his mind, he was searching for the words he would need to persuade Evan to flee with him should the worst come to pass.

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence, aren't you going to stay with her?" came Evan's surprised query when Lawrence returned to the room.

Noticing the change in mood, Elsa casually withdrew her hand from Evan's, wiping the corners of her eyes. Holo was never so sweet.

"Ah, if it would be better for me to be elsewhere, I can go."

Elsa cleared her throat, and Evan looked blank.

Lawrence wondered if that was what he looked like from the outside, but he didn't have the luxury of such pointless worries at the moment.

No doubt Elsa, too, would prefer to simply be at Evan's side, never having to worry about anything.

She soon regained her neutral expression.

"Well, then, how can my knowledge and experience help you?"

"I heard from Elder Sem earlier that if all the wheat is returned, we will be short seventy *limar*."

The *limar* was a gold coin equal to twenty silver *trenni* pieces, which meant the debt would come to about fourteen hundred *trenni*.

That was probably equivalent to the amount the town had spent on repairing their tools, laying in provisions for the winter, and on buying food, drink, and luxuries. Generously estimating Tereo's population at one hundred households, that came to fourteen silver pieces for each one. The village's farmland was not particularly large

—fourteen silver pieces was far too high a figure.

"Even if they collect everything I own, it would be like scattering water on a hot cooking stone. If Enberch is the buyer, they'll beat the price down as low as they can. All the wheat in my cart would barely go for two hundred silver at best," said Lawrence.

"That's not all we lack. We can't very well eat the seed grain that's been stored in the granary, so we'll need to come up with funds to purchase more to eat...," said Elsa.

"Could we not test the returned wheat for poison by feeding small amounts of it to, say, dogs?" Evan asked.

In the worst case, that would be their only option.

But would the villagers be able to survive mainly on bread from possibly poisoned wheat clear through to the next year's harvest?

Unlikely.

"Khepas liquor is invisible, and even if you took a handful of safe wheat from a sack, the wheat directly beneath it might well be poisoned."

Even supposing that Holo could tell poisoned wheat from safe, they would never be able to make the villagers trust her.

They could pick some flour at random and make a loaf of bread, but the next loaf might well be deadly.

"It is not hard to see that this is all Enberch's doing. And yet we cannot expose them—why? Why is it that the first one to tell a lie receives all the trust?" blurted Elsa, palm against her forehead.

Such things happened in business all the time.

Lawrence had seen any number of scuffles wherein the party to cast the first stone wound up winning.

It was a common saying that while God reveals the model for righteousness, He does not execute its proof.

Elsa's feeling of powerlessness was understandable.

"Bemoaning our fate will get us nowhere," said Lawrence.

Elsa nodded, her head still resting in her hand. She looked up and spoke. "True. I can't very well cry now, my father…Father Franz, he would…would…"

"Elsa!"

Her legs seemed to lose all their strength, and she was about to collapse, but Evan managed to catch her just before she did.

She seemed exhausted, her eyes half-lidded and unfocused. She'd had her hand pressed to her head out of dizziness—anemia, perhaps.

"I'll fetch Iima," said Lawrence.

Evan nodded, then lay Elsa down gently, pushing the chair aside.

Elsa had fainted before when Lawrence and Holo had revealed the truth of Holo's existence.

This leader of a church that no one attended—she was not so different from a god without worshippers.

With neither tithes nor offerings, she had only a poor miller for company.

No matter how the two of them split their meager bread, it would come with intolerable suffering, Lawrence could tell.

He headed to the entrance of the sanctuary where he found Iima planted in a chair. She stood as soon as she noticed Lawrence.

"Miss Elsa has collapsed."

“Again? Anemia, right? She pushes herself too far, that girl.”

Iima brushed past Lawrence and returned shortly carrying Elsa in her arms, heading for the living room.

Behind them came Evan, holding a candle in one hand, his expression clouded.

“Hey, Mr. Lawrence?”

“Hm?”

“What’s…what’s going to become of us?” asked Evan as he looked blankly toward the living room. He seemed a different person from the Evan of a few moments ago.

Elsa’s collapse had clearly shaken him.

No, that wasn’t it, Lawrence corrected himself.

Evan couldn’t let himself look uncertain in front of Elsa.

Even the stout Elsa had turned to Evan for reassurance as soon as Lawrence was no longer nearby.

And as the one whose reassurance was sought, Evan could not let himself look weak.

But that did not mean he didn’t have fears of his own.

“Elsa keeps saying it can’t be, but the villagers—they all suspect you and me, don’t they?”

Evan did not look at Lawrence.

“That’s right,” Lawrence said, staring off vaguely.

Evan inhaled sharply. “I knew it…”

His face looked almost relieved.

It seemed to Lawrence like an expression of defeat, but suddenly Evan continued. “Still—,” he said, looking up. “Was what you said before true?”

“Which part?”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but…the part about being able to escape.”

“Oh yes. Yes, we can escape.”

Evan looked quickly toward the living room, then back at Lawrence. “With Elsa as well?”

“Yes.”

Evan was used to being the object of suspicion but unused to feeling that emotion himself; he looked uncomfortable.

It was clear that beneath the flames of his doubt was a desire to believe.

“If my companion and I escape alone, the blame will fall upon you and Elsa. It is thus my own selfish wish that if there is to be an escape, I would want to bring both of you with me.”

“That’s not selfish at all! I don’t want to die here. I don’t want to let Elsa die here. If you’ll help us, I want to run. Even Elsa, I’m sure she —” Evan looked down, wiping the corners of his eyes before continuing. “I’m sure she wants to get out of this village. The villagers claim to owe Father Franz a great debt, but they never show a bit of gratitude. They never listened to his teachings, and even when they offered huge sacrifices to the old god of the village, they wouldn’t give so much as a loaf of bread to the church. If it hadn’t been for Elder Sem and Mrs. Iima, we’d have starved to death long ago.”

Evan’s words were heavy and unpremeditated.

It seemed like he had much more to say, and his mouth opened as

if to speak. His thoughts could not keep up, though, and no words came.

It was Iima emerging from the living room who interrupted. “The outside world isn’t great, either,” she said, hands on her hips and a weary expression on her face. “But it’s a lot better than this place. I don’t know how many times I’ve tried to tell her.”

“You’ve some experience with the traveling life, don’t you?” asked Lawrence.

“I surely do. You heard my tales at the tavern, didn’t you? I don’t think a person needs to stay in the same town or village her whole life. The villagers’ attitude changed just like that as soon as Father Franz’s health failed, but that girl’s so stubborn. She would’ve wanted to leave long ago, Evan, even without you telling her to.”

Evan turned away, though out of embarrassment or anger it was difficult to say.

“But what’s going on now…it’s a disaster for the village. I’m just as scared about our future as anyone else. But I have to admit that it would be a good chance for this misfit church to finally wash its hands of Tereo.”

Saying the church would “wash its hands” of Tereo was putting a nice face on it. There was no getting around the fact that Elsa and Evan were being chased out. Lawrence hoped that Holo wasn’t listening in on this conversation.

However, he didn’t feel that it made any sense for Elsa and Evan to stay behind just to die together.

“So, if you…er…,” started Iima.

“Lawrence. Kraft Lawrence.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Lawrence. If you have some way of escaping with them, I think you should. No—I want you to. This place is my home,

after all. I don't want it to have the reputation that would come from putting innocent people to death. It would be too sad."

The village's wheat had been poisoned and was going to be returned. How many people would worry about reputation in such a crisis?

"I suppose we'll need to persuade Elsa."

Iima nodded at Evan's statement.

People left their hometowns for many reasons. Some, like Lawrence, cut all ties while others left out of necessity. Still others—Iima, for example—had their homes destroyed.

Holo had left to go traveling for a time and had ended up not returning home for centuries, during which time Yoitsu was destroyed.

Sometimes things went as one wished; other times they did not. Why was the way of the world always thus?

Perhaps it was because they were in a church that Lawrence's thoughts strayed to such uncharacteristic places.

"I expect everyone will stay quiet until Enberch's messenger arrives. It would be best to make your preparations and leave by then if you're leaving," said Iima.

Sem had said that the messenger would probably arrive around daybreak.

They had some time until then.

Evan nodded and dashed off to the living room.

Lawrence was about to check on Holo when Iima stopped him.

"There's all this talk of leaving, but exactly how do you plan on escaping?" she asked.

It was a perfectly reasonable question.

Its answer, however, was anything but.

"If one can enter a forest and chance upon a maiden who brews delicious ale, then surely there are other equally mysterious beings in the world?"

Iima was taken aback for a moment, then smiled dubiously. "Don't tell me you've met a fairy."

It was a gamble.

Lawrence shrugged and gave a vague nod.

Iima laughed heartily. "Ha! Do such things truly happen, I wonder."

"No doubt the duke who discovered you felt the same way."

Iima smiled, then touched her cheek thoughtfully. "I certainly heard such stories on my travels, but to think...I gather you speak of your companion?"

The gamble had paid off.

"I cannot very well lie in a church."

"Quite so. Well, I am but the mistress of the tavern and may as well be drunk the whole year long. All I wish is for this village to be a good one. I'm sorry for holding you up."

Lawrence shook his head. "Not at all."

Iima grinned. "I've heard tell that to capture a luck fairy in a bottle, you need to use liquor brewed from nectar. It's liquor that lured me to this village as well."

"I'll make sure to use wine next time I'm in trouble," said Lawrence with a smile as he turned and walked back into the darkness.

Heading toward the back of the sanctuary where he expected to find Holo, he rounded the second corner only to run face-first into a wall.

Or so he thought—but what now appeared to be before him was a thick, heavy book.

"Fool. As though I would be taken in by mere drink."

Lawrence took the book, rubbing his nose. He stole a glance at Holo.

She did not appear to have been racked with sobs.

This fact relieved him.

"So are you finished talking?"

"More or less."

"Mm. Well, for my part I've reached my goal. All I need to do now is keep you safe."

Lawrence looked at the book. Holo noticed his glance. "Half and half, I'd say," she said.

"Half and half?"

"Half of me wishes I hadn't read it, and the other half is glad I did."

It wasn't a very clear answer. She gestured with her chin at the volume, as if telling Lawrence to see for himself, then sat down beside the candle and brought her tail out.

The sheet of parchment stuck between the book's pages probably marked the section that dealt with Yoitsu.

Lawrence, though, started at the beginning.

The book was organized as a narrative that began with the origins

of the bear spirit and continued on into the many stories about the spirit from various regions.

It was written in the book that the bear spirit was truly gigantic, well worthy of the epithet “moon hunter.” It was said to be so vast that even the highest mountain was but a cushion for the bear spirit to lie upon.

The white-furred beast had a savage disposition and was said to be a harbinger of death. It killed without mercy all who opposed it. The bear spirit traveled from region to region, challenging any being that was worshipped as a god. Once it had killed, it devoured all the food in the region and moved on. The tales in the book were all thus.

Aside from the section marked by the sheet of parchment, the stories were much the same.

Among them, the longest tale concerned the bear spirit’s battle against the sea serpent of Teuperovan, a creature so vast that a continent and countless islands were carried on its back. There was even a song written about the great conflict, the lyrics of which contained a reference to an island in the region of Radoon, which had been created when earth fell from the serpent’s back in the course of the battle. The fight between the bear and serpent had been fierce, and many pages were devoted to recording its extent.

The other tales, while not quite so epic, were still spectacular, and all served to confirm both the bear’s invincible savagery and the number of lesser spirits it had felled.

It was easy to understand why Father Franz had wanted to judge the tales without bias.

If these stories were to be believed, it would mean that the spirits in this area had already been ravaged before the Church moved in from the south.

Once Lawrence read the section that dealt with Yoitsu, his feelings became rather complicated.

Though Yoitsu was indeed mentioned, it seemed the spirits of the region had all tucked their tails between their legs and run, and Yoitsu itself had been torn apart in less time than it takes for fruit to drop from a tree's branch to the ground. That was all that had been written. If one were flipping quickly through the pages, that section would be easy to miss.

The spirits of the region were no doubt Holo's old friends. If they had truly fled, that meant they were safe, but it also made them look unavoidably pathetic.

Lawrence now knew what Holo had meant by half wishing she had not read it and being half glad that she had.

Yoitsu's story had not even been very interesting—it was but a brief, unexciting section. Holo could not have enjoyed it.

All that said, the fact that Yoitsu had not been destroyed after a bitter, desperate struggle was good fortune within bad. If this was all true, then perhaps the spirits who knew the name Yoitsu had just moved elsewhere.

Just as Holo was unable to be genuinely happy at this news, Lawrence did not know what to say to her. If her companions were alive, it was because they were cowards.

He closed the book and glanced surreptitiously at Holo's back.

The time when the world revolved around the gods had passed. Even the Church with all its great influence in the south felt the effects.

But there were many gods who had never held particularly strong influence, even in the distant past.

In the face of this truth—that the world of the gods was not so very different from that of the humans—Holo's form seemed smaller than usual.

She had even been subjected to scorn in her own village.

Lawrence felt as though he understood the source of her loneliness.

She was no different from a person—in some ways, she was every bit the young girl she appeared to be. Just as it occurred to him—

"Perhaps it is just my imagination, but I feel as though someone is looking at me in a truly infuriating way."

Holo turned around and gave Lawrence an overpowering glare.

The monarch of a small country was a monarch nonetheless.

"No, no, I'm not...No, I suppose I am. I am sorry. Don't be so angry."

Normally Holo would have turned away. Lawrence had no choice but to capitulate under her withering gaze.

He was surely correct about her.

"Hmph. I am satisfied knowing my friends are safe. That is all there is."

No doubt she wanted to add, "So ask me no further," but her pride as a wisewolf would not let her make such a pitiful request.

Lawrence could not help but feel some amusement at her faintly childish manner.

He coughed to conceal the smile that unavoidably rose to his lips, then spoke. "That is indeed good news, but we still have no more information about Yoitsu's location."

He flipped through the pages once again.

While information on Yoitsu itself was sparse, it seemed all of the tales of the bear spirit were very old, most of them taking place in towns or villages that Lawrence had never heard of and in nations

with unfamiliar names.

He had heard a few of the tales before—notably, the tale of the sea serpent—and though he knew of the Radoon region, there was nothing that helped him narrow down the whereabouts of Yoitsu.

Yet of all the stories of massive destruction wrought by the bear spirit, what strange coincidence was it that Lawrence had heard of Yoitsu?

It was pointless to consider, yet Lawrence could not help thinking about this.

"The world does not go as one would wish," he said, closing the book.

Holo chewed on the tip of her tail. "Quite." She sighed. "So what of those in this village for which the world goes not as they would wish? If you would escape, do decide quickly. It would be best to leave in the dark of night."

"Elsa and I are of one mind on our fates should we remain. We'll need to make sure we're correct, but in that case, I think discretion will be the better part of valor."

"A poor idea is worse than none," she said with a yawn, standing. "Still, if it comes to that, you stand to take quite a loss."

"It can't be helped. It's not as though we can bring the wheat with us."

"Still, you don't seem too upset about it."

"Don't I?" asked Lawrence, stroking his chin. It was not the first time he had been caught up in this kind of dispute. Sometimes losses were unavoidable.

It was true that his profit in Kumersun had far exceeded his expectations, but even given that, Lawrence was still surprised at his

own calm.

And in any case, a traveler's life was a cheap thing in an isolated village. Knowing his own life was not actually in danger was profit enough.

"Still, even with things as they are, there are some expensive things we can probably save," said Lawrence.

"The pepper, right?"

Any merchant would have thought the same thing. Pepper and other spices were expensive because they were scarce. Though if they couldn't stock up on any, there was no point in talking about transporting it.

Something occurred to Lawrence as he was mulling this over. "There's a high-value product even lighter than spices that we can bring with us."

"Oh?"

"It's trust."

Holo gave Lawrence a rare look of admiration, then smiled maliciously. "I'll wait to sell off your trust in me until it's a bit more valuable."

"Do you have any idea just how paranoid I've become since being teased so mercilessly by you?"

Holo chuckled, then slipped her arm around Lawrence's. "I suppose I will have to make it up to you."

"This is exactly the sort of thing I've learned to be suspicious of."

Holo was unmoved; she narrowed her eyes. "Lies will only lower the value of your trust."

She never played fair.

“Still, you’ve never once blamed me for this trouble we’re in, and for that I am properly grateful.”

“Huh?”

“If I had not insisted upon coming here, you would not be suffering this loss.”

So she was playing this card now, Lawrence mused.

Yet they were probably her true feelings.

“Well, what say you moderate your eating and drinking for a while to make up for the loss, hm?”

Holo groaned. “You’ve certainly become less restrained.”

“Feel free to take the reins and—,” began Lawrence as he slipped the sheet of parchment back between the pages of the book. Their eyes met.

The statue of the Holy Mother looked down on the two, her head drooping as though at a loss at the foolish conversation taking place below her.

The sound that now echoed through the sanctuary loud enough for Lawrence to hear it was certainly not a blessing from the Holy Mother. Someone was banging on the door of the Church.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Lawrence.

“Bad feelings are usually correct,” said Holo, letting go of Lawrence’s arm. The two scampered down the hallway.

Lawrence heard the sound of knocking again, along with Iima shouting something in response.

It was obvious to both of them that the villagers were demanding that Iima hand over Lawrence and Holo.

“No, not this way!” said Iima. “To the back of the church—go!”

“But—”

“They’re babbling on about if they hand you over to Enberch, Enberch will forgive all this! They were never planning to do anything themselves. Even wheat just grows up out of the ground on its own—they’re happy to harvest it so long as it’s convenient. So long as things are easy, they’ll do anything to keep it that way!”

As Iima was talking, there were more heavy knocks on the door.

It was a church in a pagan area and as such had a heavy wooden bolt on the door.

It seemed unlikely that the villagers would be able to break through the main door, but there was a flimsy wooden window in the living room. If they got serious, they could easily break it and get inside the church.

It was now a fight against time.

Just then, Evan appeared with Elsa in tow.

“I’ll go and persuade them to—,” Elsa began.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Iima.

“But—!”

Iima gave the door a hard thump from the inside, then turned to face Elsa. “You going out to face them would be like throwing fuel on a fire. You think you’ve done a good job hiding it, but everyone knows you and Evan are close. In the worst case, they would call you a heretic just to be able to turn you over to Enberch.”

Iima had a good grasp of the situation.

Lawrence could easily picture it. Forced to choose between Elsa and the village, even Sem, who had been Elsa and Evan’s last ray of hope,

would probably side with the village.

No one wanted to throw away their life, their position, their name, and their home.

“Listen well, now. You can’t stay here. Look at these two strange travelers, and you’ll understand—the world is vast. The villagers cannot comprehend it. You should at least try to begin your new life with companions you can trust,” said Iima.

There was much Elsa and Evan had to abandon, but there was much they would gain.

Elsa turned to look at Evan, and then both of them looked down.

Lawrence took this in and realized that the two needed to exchange no words to convey their thoughts at the moment. Just then, Holo tugged at his sleeve.

Though she had never said it, she must have given up many things in leaving the village she’d inhabited for so many centuries.

“No matter the journey, when you come to a fork in the road, you must decide in an instant which path to take,” said Holo.

“You’re quite right,” agreed Lawrence.

Elsa squeezed her eyes shut and openly grabbed Evan’s hand.

She opened her eyes. “I want to run.”

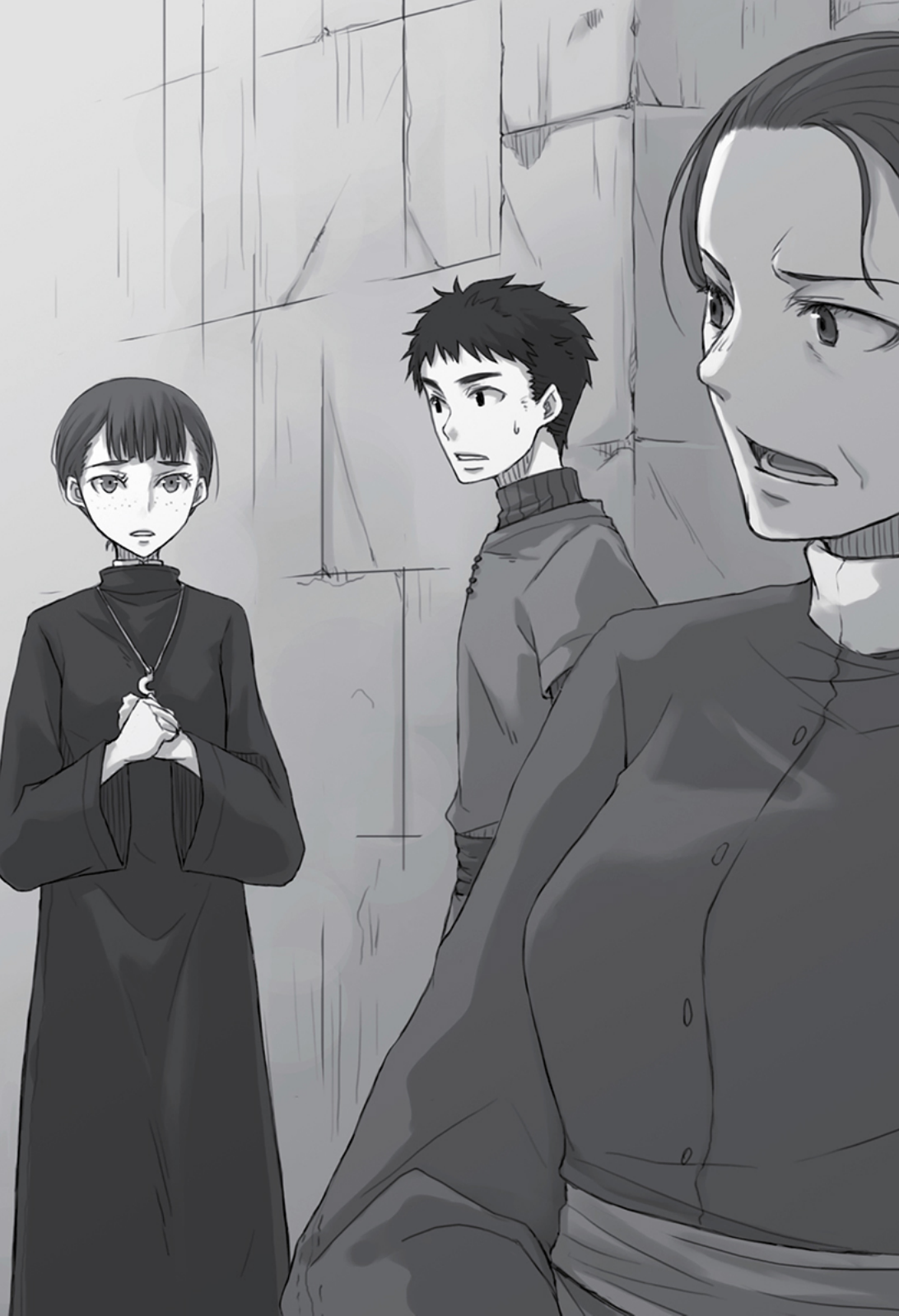
Iima looked back at Lawrence, who looked at Holo.

“Leave it to me,” said Holo. “I have one condition,” she continued, pulling back her hood and ignoring Iima and Evan’s surprise. “Think of everything that happens from now ’til dawn as a dream.”

When it came to decisiveness, perhaps women were better than men.

Elsa nodded, and only after seeing her agree did Evan also nod.

“What am I but a fairy that brews ale in the forest? Drunkards remember nothing,” said Iima.



Holo smiled. “Then leave this all to me. Now, if the lot outside have spears, I can jump past them easily enough, but they could still trouble you.”

“Does the church have a back door?” Lawrence asked.

For a moment Elsa began to shake her head, but stopped. “Perhaps—Father Franz told me about the cellar only once, but when he did, he said there was an underground passage accessible from its rear.”

If the construction of churches was the same the world over, then so were the actions of the people within them.

Any church with as many enemies as this one had would have secret passages for escape—it was a well-known fact among the kind of people that needed to know.

“Well, let’s use that,” said Lawrence.

Elsa nodded and looked at Iima.

“Things should be all right for a bit longer. They haven’t decided exactly what they want to do out there yet.”

It was true—once Iima had banged on the door from the inside, the hubbub seemed to have quieted.

“We’ll go down to the basement, then,” said Lawrence.

“We’re relying on you,” said Elsa, her tone firm, though uncertainty colored her features.

Anyone would feel trepidation upon suddenly hearing they had to leave their birthplace forever, unless they’d spent their days dreaming of doing exactly that.

“You’ve got it easy,” said Iima. “At least you can do a bit of preparation before you leave.” Iima’s own hometown had been razed by pirates, and she’d had to flee for her life.

“Indeed,” agreed Holo. “It is not as though your home will have disappeared tomorrow. Be glad it will still exist.”

“Oh, ho, Miss Fairy has lost her home as well?”

“Don’t lump me in with those weaklings.”

Knowledge of others’ suffering did not lessen one’s own suffering, after all.

It could be used for a bit of encouragement, though.

Elsa recovered her resolve. “We’ll make ready right way,” she said.

“Do you have traveling money?” Iima asked.

“Evan,” Lawrence said. Evan remembered the coin purse Lawrence had entrusted him with and produced it for Lawrence. “This should be enough for the four of us, provided we’re frugal,” said Lawrence.

“Good. Right, off with you!”

At Iima’s words, everyone sprang into action.

She was the image of a heroic woman, mused Lawrence as he ran. Once they arrived at the statue of the Holy Mother, Holo spoke up as if having read Lawrence’s thoughts.

“Even I cannot match her presence.”

Lawrence opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it.

This did not, of course, go unnoticed.

“Worry not—this is the only form I can assume,” she said with a laugh.

Lawrence harrumphed, partially out of embarrassment, and replied, “It’s a shame. I prefer a more generous figure.”

Holo cocked her head and smiled, then smacked Lawrence in the face with her closed fist. “Just open the cellar.”

Lawrence decided not to think too much about what had angered Holo lest it bring still more anger.

CHAPTER FIVE



Chapter Five

Lawrence had been concerned that Elsa and Evan would have trouble getting their things together quickly, but perhaps thanks to Evan's long-standing desire to leave, they were prepared in short order.

The supplies they had prepared contained nothing unnecessary, save perhaps for a battered book of scriptures. It was a passing grade.

"The passage?"

"I've found it," said Lawrence. "It's blocked by a wall."

Directly opposite the foot of the staircase leading down to the cellar, there was a section of bare wall where no bookshelves had been set.

Once he knew that there was a passage out of the cellar, that was the first place Lawrence looked. After knocking a few times upon the wall, it was clear that beyond it was a hollow space. He kicked at it, causing cracks to form in the mortar between stones and eventually breaking through.

Beyond the wall was a perfectly round tunnel—so round it was eerie.

It was less a passageway and more of a cave or den of sorts.

"Shall we?" said Lawrence.

Under the watchful gaze of the Holy Mother, Evan and Elsa nodded.

Iima was probably still above them at the church door, keeping the villagers from doing anything reckless.

Lawrence took a deep breath and, candle in hand, headed into the tunnel. Holo followed immediately behind him with Elsa and Evan bringing up the rear.

There were still many unread books in the cellar. In one of them may well have been tales of Holo's old companions.

And from a strictly mercantile point of view, the magnificently bound volumes were worth a fortune.

Lawrence very badly wished to bring one with him in order to add to their meager travel funds, but he didn't have the nerve to try and bring a book chock-full of pagan stories along on such a trip.

In case of trouble, a book was silent and unhelpful, whereas the strange girl with her ears and tail could muster eloquence that no merchant could match.

And so Lawrence stepped farther into the tunnel.

His body was immediately surrounded by a strange chill. The tunnel was not high enough for him to stand up straight; he had to duck his head slightly to pass. It was narrow enough that he could touch both sides simultaneously with his outstretched hands. Fortunately, the air did not seem stale or moldy.

Candle in hand, Lawrence saw that the tunnel was as strangely circular as it had first appeared to be with large stones here and there deliberately and cleanly chiseled into the proper shape.

And yet the tunnel was not straight; it wound to and fro.

If the builders had not intended for the tunnel to be perfectly straight, then why go to all the trouble of deliberately carving it into these contortions? It made no sense to Lawrence.

The passage also had a raw, animalistic smell, which conveyed a sense of unease wholly different from the smells that filled the sewers of Pazzio.

Lawrence held the candle in his right hand and Holo's hand in his left. He could sense a slight nervousness coming from her.

All were silent as they walked.

They had decided that Iima would close the entrance to the cellar after a time, but Lawrence now found himself worrying about whether she would open it back up for them should this tunnel turn out not to have an exit.

They proceeded forward nonetheless, undaunted. The passage had no branches off it despite its winding nature.

If a fork were to appear in the path, Lawrence knew he would probably succumb to the pressure and speak.

Silently, silently, they walked farther along the passageway. It was hard to know how much time had passed, but eventually they could detect snatches of fresh air amid the fetid smell in the tunnel.

"We are close," murmured Holo, which elicited an obvious sigh of relief from Evan.

Taking care not to let the candle blow out, Lawrence quickened his pace.

Urged on by the unbearable eeriness of the tunnel, he saw moonlight in the space of time that it took to take three breaths.

Trees grew thickly around the tunnel's other entrance, which made Lawrence assume that it was hidden between crags. But no—as he approached, he soon saw that was not the case at all.

The entrance was wide, seeming to almost gulp down the moonlight.

He had assumed the entrance would be situated in a hidden, inconspicuous location, but before it stood something that was distinctly altarlike.

As he approached to get a better look, Lawrence saw that a broad, flat stone had been placed carefully upon four square rocks. Upon the flat stone lay some dried fruit and wheat.

Surely not, Lawrence murmured to himself.

Holo likewise seemed to notice and looked at Lawrence.

A moment later, Elsa's voice called out, "Th-this is—"

"Ha! Oh, this is great," said Evan, laughing.

The tunnel that led from the church seemed to pass through a hill at the outskirts of the village, emerging on the opposite side.

If they followed the gentle slope down, there was a scattering of forest, and past that could be seen the faint reflection of moonlight off the brook.

When all four had exited the tunnel and made sure there were no villagers nearby, they looked back at the hole.

"Mr. Lawrence, do you know what that hole is?" Elsa asked.

"Not really."

"It's the burrow that Lord Truyeo used when he came from the far north to hibernate long, long ago."

Lawrence had more or less guessed as much upon seeing the altar with the offerings on it, but his face still betrayed surprise when his suspicions were confirmed.

"Every year for sowing and harvest, the villagers come here to give prayers and celebrate. We don't usually participate, but…why would the church passageway lead here?"

"I don't know why, but it's certainly clever. The villagers would never dare to enter," said Lawrence.

Still, there were things about the tunnel that were strange.

If Father Franz had dug it, it was impossible to imagine that the villagers wouldn't have noticed him doing so, and in any case, the villagers had been worshipping Truyeo long before the church was built.

Lawrence looked at Holo as he thought it over and saw that she was staring vaguely at the cave's entrance.

Suddenly he understood—the strange twisting of the tunnel, the perfectly carved rocks here and there, and the complete lack of any bats despite the perfection of the cave.

And there was that raw, fetid smell.

Noticing Lawrence's look, Holo smiled, then turned to look at the moon that hung in the night sky.

"Come, staying here is like asking them to find us! Let us first head down to the brook," she said.

There were no arguments.

Elsa and Evan trotted through the dry grass of the hillside as Lawrence blew the candle out and took one last look over the area.

"Is this den real?" He hadn't dared ask the question in front of Elsa and Evan.

"There was a great snake here. As to how long ago, that even I cannot tell."

It might not even have been Truyeo.

It might have been sheer coincidence that the church's cellar intersected with the path of the den. Properly speaking, the cellar had been constructed in the middle of the den, which probably continued past the cellar in the opposite direction.

Lawrence had no idea whether or not there truly was a giant snake curled up somewhere deeper within.

Holo regarded the entrance somehow both sadly and fondly as she spoke. “It just happened to make a burrow here, and yet people continuously come to worship. I doubt it has ever been able to get a proper nap.”

“That’s not the kind of thing a merchant who superstitiously follows the paths of the saints wants to hear.”

Holo smiled and shrugged. “’Tis hardly my fault humans are such queer creatures that they must find something to worship.” Her smile turned malicious. “Do you not wish to worship me?”

Lawrence knew she hated being worshipped and feared as a god, so she was clearly not being serious.

Yet he had no ready retort.

After all, when she was in a foul temper, he would offer her sacrifices to calm her.

Lawrence sighed and looked away; Holo chuckled.

Suddenly he felt her take his hand. “Let us go,” she said, pulling him along as she ran down the hillside.

He looked at her face in profile. She seemed less satisfied over her teasing of him and more relieved about something.

Perhaps seeing the den of Truyeo, who the villagers all worshipped, reminded her of her own past and the village she had once inhabited.

It was surely out of embarrassment over turning suddenly sentimental that Holo had resorted to teasing Lawrence.

She continued to run under the moonlight.

Aside from pretending not to notice, there was little Lawrence could

do to help her with these pangs of weakness.

It made him feel completely useless, and yet Holo was still willing to take his hand.

Maybe this was the perfect distance to maintain, he mused—with just a bit of loneliness.

Such were the thoughts that occupied his mind as they descended the face of the hill to catch up with the pair that had reached the riverbank ahead of them.

"So, how do we escape?" asked Evan.

Lawrence handed the question off to Holo.

"We'll need to first make for Enberch."

"Huh?"

"We've been there once before. We'll need some sense of the lay of the land if we're to escape undetected."

Evan nodded, as if to say, "Oh, I see."

But Holo still looked vaguely displeased as she kicked pebbles around by the bank of the brook. She sighed. "Let me just say this," she said, facing Evan and Elsa, who were still holding hands. "If you cower in fear, I'll devour the both of you."

Lawrence fought back the urge to point out that this statement itself was threatening enough. Holo was probably aware of that.

She was like a child who knew her demands were unreasonable but could not help making them anyway.

The two nodded, unsurprisingly taken aback by Holo's manner. Holo looked to one side, seeming somewhat embarrassed herself. "Both of you! Turn around and look the other way! And you—"

“Right,” said Lawrence.

Holo pulled her hood back and removed her cape. She handed her clothes to Lawrence piece by piece as she removed each item.

Just watching her was enough to make Lawrence feel cold. Evan looked over his shoulder, apparently unable to resist peeking at the sudden sound of clothes rustling.

Holo did not have to snap at him because Elsa did it for her.

Lawrence sympathized with Evan.

“Truly, why is the human form so weak against cold?” Holo complained.

“It makes me chilly just looking at you,” said Lawrence.

“Hmph.”

She took off her shoes and tossed them to Lawrence, then finally removed the pouch containing wheat grains that dangled from her neck.

There they stood amid the bare-branched trees dimly lit by the moon.

The brook reflected the moonlight like a mirror.

Before that brook stood a strange girl with keen wolf ears and a fluffy tail that seemed to be the only warm part of her body.

It truly was a vision from a dream before daybreak.

White puffs of breath escaped from Holo’s mouth. She suddenly looked at Lawrence.

“Do you want words of praise now?” he asked with a shrug.

Holo gave him a defeated smile in return.

Lawrence turned his back to her, looking away.

There beneath the sparkling moonlight, the maiden became a wolf.

This world did not belong solely to the Church.

The proof of that was now no farther away than the opposite bank of the babbling brook.

"My fur truly is the finest."

Lawrence turned and looked at the source of the low, rumbling voice and was met by a pair of red-tinged eyes shining back at him, bright as the moon.

"If you ever wish to sell it, just say the word," said Lawrence.

Holo curled her lips back, revealing a row of sharp teeth.

He knew her well enough to understand this was a smile.

Now all that remained was the test of Elsa and Evan. Holo seemed to sigh, looking at their shapes, their backs still turned in the gloom.

"Hmph. Well, I cannot say my expectations were high. Come, climb upon me. 'Twill be bothersome if we're discovered."

A bird stalked by a dog lacks the strength to take off and fly, and despite Holo's words, this was so of Elsa and Evan.

It was not until Lawrence circled around to stand in front of Elsa and Evan and gestured with his chin that they could bring themselves to turn around.

Even Lawrence had been terrified almost past the ability to stand when he had seen Holo's true form for the first time.

In his mind, he applauded the couple for not fainting dead away.

"This is naught but a dream before daybreak, remember?" he said,

looking particularly at Elsa.

They neither cried out nor tried to run, merely looking back at Lawrence for a moment before facing Holo again.

"So Father Franz wasn't lying," murmured Evan, which elicited a long-fanged smile from Holo.

"Come, let's get on," said Lawrence.

Holo heaved a great, weary sigh, then crouched down low.

Lawrence, Elsa, and Evan all climbed upon her back, each gripping her stiff, bristly fur.

"If you should fall, I will pick you up with my mouth. Be prepared."

Evidently this was Holo's standard warning when bearing humans on her back.

Elsa and Evan took the warning to heart, tightening their grip on her fur, which gave Holo a chuckle.

"Let us be off, then."

She ran, every bit a wolf.

Riding on Holo's back was like plunging into freezing water.

Her feet were terrifyingly swift. She traced a wide circle around the village, then made for Enberch, arriving almost immediately at the path she and Lawrence had taken into Tereo with the wagon.

Elsa and Evan were meanwhile feeling something well past mere terror.

Though they shivered uncontrollably, they themselves had no sense of whether this was out of cold or fear.

The path along which Holo ran was barely a path at all; her passengers would be pressed against her back one instant, only to be nearly flung off the next. They could not relax for a moment.

Lawrence clung to Holo's fur with all his might, praying that Elsa and Evan behind him would not be tossed off.

It was hard to know how much time had passed, but after a span that seemed at once to be a crushing eternity and a brief nap, Holo's run slowed to a stop, and she crouched down again.

No one asked if they had been spotted.

Holo was unquestionably the least tired of them all, despite carrying three people on her back.

Lawrence's body was stiff and cramped, and he could not so much as loosen his hands' grip on Holo's fur—yet he could hear her tail brushing across the grassy ground.

She did not order her passengers off.

Holo no doubt understood that they could barely move.

She knew that if she had continued to run, one of her three passengers would surely have given out and fallen.

"...How far have we come?" It took Lawrence some time to muster the strength to ask a question.

"Halfway."

"So is this a break, or—," began Lawrence, when behind him, the exhausted Elsa and Evan seemed to twitch at the alternative.

Holo noticed their reaction as well.

"Our flight would be for naught if you die on the way. We've come far enough that it would take a horse some time to catch up. We'll rest awhile."

The news of their escape from Tereo could only travel as fast as a horse could gallop.

They could afford to rest until then.

At Holo's words, Lawrence felt fatigue press down on him.

"Don't sleep on top of me. Climb down."

She sounded displeased, so Lawrence and Evan were able to somehow climb down—but Elsa was at her limit and had to be lifted off of Holo's back.

Lawrence wanted to light a fire for warmth, but Holo had stopped in a small patch of woods between hills along the path that linked Enberch and Tereo—as long as they stayed quiet, they would not be discovered. Lighting a fire, however, would make them much easier to spot.

In any case, the problem of warmth was quickly solved.

They were, after all, right next to a giant ball of fur.

"I suddenly feel like a mother."

Holo's deep voice rumbled deep in Lawrence's stomach as he leaned against her.

Elsa and Evan wrapped themselves in a blanket they had brought from the church, snuggling up against Holo, and Holo curled her great tail around the three of them.

Her fur was so warm that Lawrence could not even remember if he'd smiled the rueful smile he felt at her words, so quickly had he fallen asleep.

Though merchants can sleep under nearly any circumstances, Lawrence did not sleep especially soundly.

Holo shifted slightly, and he awoke.

The sky had lightened; the morning mist was thin.

Lawrence stood, careful not to wake the still-sleeping Elsa and Evan who lay beside him. His body felt lighter as he slowly stretched himself out.

He gave himself one final, great stretch, arms reaching high, then relaxed with a sigh.

His mind was filled with what they had yet to do.

No matter which town he and Holo decided to go to, they would not be able to just drop Elsa and Evan off. All they could do was return briefly to Kumersun, explain the situation to the trade guild, and obtain its protection—then use the guild's connections to negotiate with Enberch and Tereo.

Next, he would reclaim the money he had deposited at the guild and make for Lenos.

That was more or less the whole of it.

He noticed that Holo was looking at him.

Even lying down as she was, her form was huge, though he no longer found it terrifying so much as mysterious.

Holo gazed at him for some time, as though she was an elaborate puppet constructed as a jest by some god. Eventually she looked away.

"What is it?"

Lawrence approached her, his feet rustling through the dry leaves underfoot. She gave him a weary look, then gestured with her chin.

Since she was clearly not demanding to have her neck scratched, Holo must be pointing at something, Lawrence decided.

Just past the hill lay the road that connected Enberch and Tereo.

He soon understood.

“So it’s safe to look, eh?”

Holo did not answer, instead yawning hugely and resting her head on her forepaws. Her ears flicked twice, three times.

Lawrence took her actions as an affirmative but still made his way over the hill with his body low and his footfalls light.

It was obvious who would be coming up the path at this hour.

He drew close to the hill’s peak, keeping his head even lower as he carefully took sight of the path.

In his first quick glance, he saw no one, but when he looked farther out, Lawrence was able to hear a quiet jumble of noises coming from the direction of Enberch.

Soon after he heard the sound, he caught sight of its source, hazy in the morning mist.

It was the caravan returning Tereo’s wheat.

Which meant that Enberch’s messenger had already reached Tereo, and depending on the specifics of the message, the villagers might have already forced their way into the church searching for Lawrence and company.

He wondered if Iima, having aided their escape, would be safe.

Her position within the village was a strong one, so she would probably be fine—but he still worried a bit for her safety.

This was immaterial, though—none of them could ever return to Tereo.

Just then, he heard the rustle of footsteps behind him. He looked

back.

It was Evan.

“How is she?” Lawrence asked.

Evan nodded—evidently Elsa was fine. He then crouched down next to Lawrence, looking off into the distance. “Are they from Enberch?”

“Must be.”

“Huh.” Evan wore a complicated expression, as though he both longed for a weapon with which to charge the procession and was glad he had no such weapon.

Lawrence looked from Evan to Holo behind them.

Holo was still lying there asleep with Elsa leaning against her.

Elsa seemed to be awake, but she stared listlessly off into space.

“Is Miss Elsa truly well?” Lawrence asked.

She had fainted from anemia, after all, then spent the night on the move.

As he considered what lay ahead of them, Elsa’s condition weighed heavy on Lawrence’s mind.

“Hard to say,” said Evan. “Her complexion is well enough, but she seems to be thinking something over.”

“Thinking?”

Evan nodded.

If this was all Evan could say, then Elsa must not have told him what was on her mind. Having been forced to suddenly leave her home, though, it was hardly surprising that she was dazed and

contemplative.

Evan turned and looked back at Elsa. Lawrence caught sight of his expression—he looked like a faithful dog who wanted nothing more than to rush to her side.

But Evan seemed to understand that she was best left alone for a time.

Evan forced his gaze back to the caravan from Enberch, which was now quite a bit closer.

"It's a sizable group," he said.

"They're probably returning all of the wheat purchased from Tereo. And those long sticks the men around the wagons are holding—spears surely."

The spearmen were merely in case the caravan met resistance from the villagers, but they lent the procession an imposing, sinister air.

"Say, Mr. Lawrence—"

"Mm?"

"Could we not ask your...um...the goddess that carried us here?"

Though Evan lowered his voice, Holo would surely hear this.

She pretended not to, though.

"Ask her what?" Lawrence prompted.

"To...to kill them all."

When all else failed, ask the gods—humans were ever thus.

And their requests were often absurd in scale.

"Suppose she did agree to such a request. It would certainly be

done. But then Enberch would simply send an army to Tereo. And we can't fight every army they could send."

Evan nodded, as though he had known what the answer would be. "I suppose."

The caravan had come quite close now.

The pair crouched and looked on.

"So what shall we do next?"

"I am planning to make for a town named Kumersun first. If we can make it there, our lives will no longer be in danger. After that, well—we'll figure that out once we're there."

"I see..."

"You should think about what you want to do. We've a connection, you and I—I'll do what I can to help," said Lawrence.

Evan closed his eyes and smiled. "Thank you."

The caravan that carried with it Tereo's undoing traveled noisily along the path, disturbing the morning peace.

It included perhaps fifteen wagons with perhaps twenty spearmen to guard the caravan.

However, what grabbed Lawrence's attention the most was a group at the rear of the procession, who were dressed somewhat differently from the rest.

The horse carrying the last cart had blinders and saddle flaps that indicated a high-ranking member of the clergy, and it was surrounded by four men bearing shields with several lower ranking clergymen in travel clothes following behind on foot.

"So that's how it is," Lawrence murmured.

Ridelius's Hellfire had been mixed in with Tereo's wheat harvest, and a citizen of Enberch had died from it.

But unless the poison wheat had been there from the very beginning, there could not possibly have been any similar deaths in Tereo.

Enberch was going to use this to its advantage.

They would claim the absence of poison victims in Tereo was proof that the village was being protected by evil spirits and that all the villagers were guilty of heresy.

"Let's go back," said Lawrence.

Evan nodded wordlessly, seeming to have vaguely perceived something himself.

Lawrence descended the hill and returned to Holo. Elsa gave him a questioning look, which he pretended not to notice.

Whatever she might ask, the answer was that Tereo's position was hopeless.

"We'll go a bit farther, then take breakfast," said Lawrence.

Elsa dropped her gaze, as if she had realized something.

She said nothing but stood, which prompted Holo to stand up as well.

Evan and Lawrence split the luggage-bearing duties, and the four started to walk with Holo in the lead.

The dry leaves crunched underfoot.

The first one to stop walking was Evan, followed by Lawrence.

Holo proceeded a few more steps, then stopped, looking back.

“Elsa?” asked Evan.

Elsa stood there still, her body wrapped in a blanket.

She stared at the ground.

Evan exchanged looks with Lawrence, then nodded and started to approach Elsa.

That very moment, Elsa spoke.

“Holo…” She was not addressing Evan. “Are you…really a god?”

Holo said nothing initially, merely swishing her tail once. She then turned to face Elsa. *“I am Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. Long have I been called a god,”* said Holo, sitting and looking directly at Elsa.

The answer surprised Lawrence.

Even more surprising was Holo’s expression as she regarded Elsa; it was very serious but not unkind.

“I dwell within the wheat and can take both wolf and human form. Humans worship me as the god of the bountiful harvest, and I am able to respond to their prayers.”

Holo seemed to have understood something.

Elsa tightened the blanket that she had wrapped around her body and over her shoulder. Holo had discerned the thoughts that lay within the girl’s breast, hidden beneath her crossed arms and blanket.

Holo must have seen the girl’s worry, or else she would never have called herself a god.

“Bountiful harvest? Does that…Are you then Truyeo’s—”

“The answer to that question is already within you.” Holo bared her teeth, perhaps in some approximation of a rueful grin.

Elsa ducked her head in a slight nod. “Truyeo is Truyeo. You are you.”

Holo half laughed and half sighed, and the dry leaves at her feet danced in the air.

Her amber eyes were filled with a kindness Lawrence had never seen.

If gods did exist, surely they were something like this with eyes that inspired reverence but not fear.

Elsa looked up.

“...If that is true, then—”

“The question you would ask...,” said Holo, her tail brushing audibly across the leaves.

Elsa swallowed her words but still looked up at Holo.

“...It should not be asked of me,” Holo finished.

Instantly Elsa’s face twisted, a tear rolling down her right cheek.

Evan took that as a sign. He rushed to her side and embraced her.

Elsa sniffed a few times, nodding her head as if to show that she was, in fact, well. She sighed, the breath escaping whitely from her mouth.

“I am Father Franz’s successor. That much I can say for certain.”

“Oh, indeed?”

Elsa smiled at Holo’s purely rhetorical question.

It was a fresh smile, the result of tossing aside a heavy burden.

Perhaps she had realized Father Franz’s true aim in collecting

stories of the pagan gods.

No—she had probably known long ago when Father Franz had told her of his secret cellar.

She had simply refused to understand.

It was just as Iima had said.

The world was vast, but the villagers' minds were narrow.

Elsa had come to realize that vastness. Her next words came naturally.

"I'm returning to the village."

"Wha—," came Evan's strangled reply.

Before he could say anything more, Elsa unwrapped the blanket she wore and thrust it into his hands.

"I am sorry, Mr. Lawrence."

While he was not sure for what precisely she was apologizing, it seemed an appropriate statement nonetheless.

Lawrence nodded, saying nothing.

Evan's acceptance, however, would be harder won.

"What's the point in going back to the village?! Even if you do, it's already too late for—"

"And yet I must."

"Why?!"

Evan took a step toward her, but Elsa was unmoved. "I am responsible for the church. I cannot abandon the villagers."

Evan reeled as though he had been physically struck. He staggered back.

"Evan—be a fine merchant, will you?"

Elsa finally pushed him away, then dashed off in the direction of the village.

Running at a woman's pace and taking rests, she would probably reach Tereo by evening.

Though he didn't wish to think about it, Lawrence knew all too well what waited for her when she arrived.

"Mr. L-Lawrence." Evan looked devastated and on the verge of tears.

Lawrence was astonished by Elsa's words. "It seems she wants you to be a fine merchant."

"...!" Evan's face twisted in fury; he seemed ready to fly at Lawrence.

Yet Lawrence continued coolly. "A merchant must be able to logically weigh gain against loss. Can you do that?"

Evan looked like a child seeing an optical illusion for the first time. He stopped in his tracks.

"No matter how stout of heart she may be, no matter how firm her resolve, that doesn't mean she is never uncertain." Lawrence shrugged and continued. "Merchants must weigh gain against loss. You want to be a merchant, do you not?"

Evan clenched his teeth, closing his eyes and squeezing his fists.

He tossed the supplies he was carrying aside, then turned and ran.

Lawrence sensed Holo approaching from behind. He turned. "So, what shall we—," he began but was unable to finish.

His body was knocked to the ground as easily as a withered tree by Holo's massive paw.

"Was I wrong?"

Holo's paw pressed down against Lawrence's chest, two of her claws making grinding noises as they pierced the earth next to Lawrence's head.

"Was I wrong?" she asked again, her eyes burning redly, her teeth bared and close.

Lawrence could feel himself sinking into the soft ground.

If she put even a bit more weight on him, she would crush his rib cage.

Still, he managed to force a few words out. "Who…who can judge such a thing?"

Holo shook her great head. *"I cannot. Still, I…I…"*

"If you fight for your home, even against hopeless odds…" Lawrence put his hand on Holo's paw. "…At least you'll have no regrets."

Lawrence felt Holo bristle.

He was going to be crushed.

Just as fear was about to overcome rational thought, Holo's form vanished.

If someone had told Lawrence he'd been dreaming, he would have believed the person.

Holo's small hand grasped his neck softly, her light body atop his.

"My claws can crush boulders. I can defeat any number of humans."

“As I well know.”

“None in Yoitsu can best me. Not human, wolf, deer, or boar.”

“What of a bear?” Lawrence did not refer to an ordinary bear.

“Could I have matched the Moon-Hunting Bear?” It was not sadness that kept her from crying, but anger.

Lawrence did not spare her feelings. “Surely not.”

At that moment, Holo raised her right hand, which had previously held Lawrence’s throat. “At least it would have been a great battle. At least the tale of Yoitsu could’ve amounted to three pages in Father Franz’s books.”

Her hand fell weakly against Lawrence’s chest.

“I don’t know whether that is true. Still, this is all hypothetical. Am I wrong?” said Lawrence.

“...You are not,” said Holo, lightly hitting his chest yet again.

“If shortly after you left Yoitsu, you had heard that the Moon-Hunting Bear was coming, I’ve no doubt you would have rushed back. But that is not what happened. We don’t know how much time passed between when you left and disaster came to Yoitsu, but in any case it happened while you could not have known of it.”

Holo had seen Elsa’s thoughts.

Should she abandon her village? Or should she fight on despite being shunned, despite there being no chance of victory? This was the choice Elsa faced.

Holo had never been given that choice—by the time she learned of her village’s fate, it was all over.

What would Holo have felt, seeing Elsa thus?

She would have wanted Elsa to choose the path of least regret.

But by doing so Elsa made Holo see with perfect clarity the path she herself had never been able to take.

“I cannot abandon the villagers,” Elsa had said—but to Holo, those words crossed time and space, accusing her.

So it was that Lawrence came at her from the same time and place. “The fact that you’re not crying shows that you yourself understand how foolish it is to feel this way.”

“I—!” Holo bared her sharp teeth, eyes red with anger.

But Lawrence was unworried as he let Holo sit there on his chest. He brushed aside a bit of mulch that remained from when she had pushed him over.

“I know that,” she finished.

Lawrence sighed and propped himself up on his elbows.

Still straddling him, Holo looked away like a scolded child.

She slid stiffly to one side, moving her legs together to sit on Lawrence’s right leg, finally offering her hand.

Lawrence took it and sat up, pulling his body from where it had half sunk into the soft earth. He sighed, fatigue showing on his face.

“What excuse were you going to give Elsa and Evan if they’d returned?”

The still-unclothed Holo turned away from Lawrence. “What do you mean, what excuse?”

“For killing me.”

Holo gave a rare look of genuine embarrassment, then wrinkled her nose. “Were I a human female, you’d have no cause to complain if I

killed you."

"I'd have no *ability* to complain, being dead."

Holo looked so cold that Lawrence wanted to hold her simply to warm her up. She looked up at his face and waited for him to continue.

"What do you wish to do?" he asked.

"That's what I should ask you."

Holo's quick retort took him by surprise. He looked up at the sky.

Even now, Holo was still Holo.

She would always be grabbing the reins.

Lawrence embraced her. "Just you wait," he said as payback for that ever-present rein grabbing.

She shifted slightly in his embrace. "Can we not do something for them?" she asked, obviously referring to Elsa, Evan, and the village of Tereo. "Yoitsu can no longer be saved, but this village might yet be."

"I'm a simple traveling merchant."

Holo's tail swished audibly. "I am not a simple wolf."

She was offering her complete cooperation.

Yet even with that, what could possibly be done?

She could not very well kill every person she didn't happen to like.

"The problem is the poison wheat, yes? If it's mixed in with the good wheat, I can still tell the difference."



“I’ve thought of that. I don’t think that can help us.”

“So there is no way to make them believe, then.”

“Short of a miracle, I don’t think so.” Lawrence paused, then said it again, “Short of a miracle…”

“What is it?”

Lawrence’s eyes moved to and fro, trying to connect the thoughts that filled his mind.

He had considered that Holo would be able to distinguish poison wheat from good. What had stopped him short was how to convince others of the wheat’s purity—or lack thereof.

Somewhere, he had heard of a similar story.

But where?

He flipped through his memories rapidly.

What finally emerged was an image of Elsa and her church.

“That’s right…a miracle…”

“Mm.”

“What do you think is the single best way for the Church to increase its followers?”

Holo made a face as though she had been made fun of. “Producing a miracle?”

“Quite. But a miracle’s fruit is always half-seed. They are not what they seem.”

Now it was Holo whose gaze darted to and fro as she chased her own frantic thoughts.

“So it would need to be something that the eye can see…,” she said thoughtfully. “Indeed. You—give me my wheat.”

Lawrence pointed at the bags he had dropped when Holo had pushed him over.

“Then reach out and fetch it for me.” Evidently she had no intention of moving from her place on his lap.

Realizing that quibbling would be pointless, Lawrence twisted around as he was told, reaching out and grabbing the sack in question, then pulling it closer to extract the pouch of wheat from within—the pouch of wheat in which Holo dwelled.

“Here,” said Lawrence.

“Mm. Now watch closely.”

She took a grain of wheat from the pouch, and placing it in the palm of her hand, she took a deep breath.

The next moment—

“Wha—!”

Before Lawrence’s eyes the grain quivered minutely, then cracked, sending a green shoot straight up, which lengthened into a white stem as it pushed skyward, its green leaves expanding outward.

Soon a new ear of wheat appeared, sagging as it ripened and the once–green wheat stalk turned golden brown.

The process had taken but a moment.

“That is about as far as it goes, and I cannot do many at once. Also”—Holo held the wheat stalk that she had grown, tickling Lawrence’s nose with the top of the wheat ear—“as you can see, this miracle, too, has seeds within it.”

“If I were to laugh, it would hardly sound natural.”

Holo frowned and thrust the stalk at Lawrence. “Well? This is all I can do that is visible to the eye. Well, this and assuming my wolf form.”

“No, this will be quite enough,” said Lawrence. He took the wheat from Holo’s hand and continued. “All that remains is to see if Elsa will accept this trick. Also—”

“Is there more?”

Lawrence nodded. “Still…,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Then it will be time to show my skill as a merchant.”

Even showing beyond all doubt which of the wheat returned by Enberch was poisonous and which was safe would not instantly deliver Tereo from the danger it faced.

By Sem’s estimate, the funds they would owe Tereo would come to around seventy *limar*. Without addressing that shortfall, the villagers could still be devoured by Enberch.

Even if Enberch had poisoned the wheat to seize control of Tereo, even if the townspeople recognized Holo’s miracle, and even if they accepted her judgment on the good wheat and the bad, they would still not buy back the wheat they had returned.

This meant that wheat would still need to be turned to cash somehow.

If it came to that point, this fell within the purview of a merchant.

And Lawrence was a merchant.

“Right. Let us return,” said Lawrence.

“Hmph. And here sit I, freezing my tail off.”

Holo stood, blocking Lawrence’s vision with a quick swish of her tail—and in that instant, she was a wolf again.

"You seem disappointed," she said with a grin of bared teeth.

Lawrence shrugged. "You seem happy."

They caught up with Elsa and Evan very quickly.

It was midday when the group arrived in Tereo.

Elsa had been unexpectedly quick to accept Lawrence's proposal.

Perhaps she had understood that without a plan, her resolve alone would not be enough to save the village.

Even a day earlier, she would have been unable to make such a decision.

"I still believe in my God—the God who is supreme among gods and creator of all," she said firmly, standing before Holo's wolf form—a form she had seen for the first time just hours earlier.

She displayed no fear in the face of a being that could swallow her in one bite or rip her to shreds with a wave of its paw.

Holo glared at Elsa wordlessly, showing her rows of sharp teeth.

Evan swallowed and looked on, but Holo knew the world well enough to understand that she did not stand at its peak.

She soon closed her terrible jaws and turned away indignantly.

"Now we must determine just how we will show this to the villagers."

"Have you any ideas?"

They were gathered at the peak of a hill outside Tereo, near Evan's millhouse. Holo stood watch.

"No matter the product, purchasing it at the source yields the greatest gain," said Lawrence.

“So, once the village has been cornered—?” asked Evan.

Lawrence nodded.

Evan continued. “Based on what we saw this morning, it looks like Bishop Van has come as well.”

“Bishop Van, eh?”

The bishop’s arrival meant that Enberch planned to corner Tereo both financially and religiously, but it also meant that there might be an opportunity to turn the situation around—a situation that earlier in the morning had seemed utterly hopeless.

It was even better, in fact, if the Church leader of Enberch was present.

No one was more qualified to witness a miracle than Bishop Van, after all.

“The group from Enberch brought spearmen with them—they will have no patience for any objections from Tereo. I highly doubt the negotiations will happen in a civilized fashion,” said Lawrence.

“I do not think Elder Sem will incite the villagers to take up arms, either,” said Elsa.

“Not that the villagers would have courage enough to do that anyway,” added Evan. His criticism was not inaccurate.

Given all that, the best time for Lawrence and company to make their appearance was clear.

“Then we should go in after Sem has bowed to Enberch’s demands,” said Elsa.

“The miracle will happen as I’ve just explained,” said Lawrence.

Elsa nodded, looking at Evan. “Evan, will you be all right?”

She referred to the task that had fallen to him.

More than anyone else's, his life was at risk.

And more than anyone else, he had to trust Holo.

He looked at Holo. "Why, it's nothing—if I should eat the poisoned wheat, you have but to kill me before I die of the poison." His fingers trembled slightly.

He had no doubt said this to appear strong before Elsa, but Holo did not fault him for that.

"I shall swallow you in a single bite. It won't hurt a bit," she answered gleefully.

"Then once we've produced this miracle, we'll leave the financial dealings to you, Mr. Lawrence," said Elsa.

"Obviously we hope they will simply take the wheat back on the spot, but yes—I'll handle it."

Elsa nodded and put her hands together. "May God's blessing go with us."

Holo then spoke quietly.

"They have come."

CHAPTER SIX



Chapter Six

In total, sixteen horse-drawn wagons rolled into Tereo, each one carrying three or four large burlap sacks.

There were twenty-three spearmen, along with men equipped with shields and gauntlets who looked very much like foot soldiers in the company of knights.

There were four clergymen on foot near a wagon. It was impossible to know how many were within their covered carriage, though Elsa said it probably contained Bishop Van and his assistant.

Also traveling with the procession was a pudgy man who appeared to be a merchant. “Ah,” Lawrence muttered to himself upon recognizing him.

Riendott was the most successful flour merchant in Enberch. It was hardly a surprise that he had been the one to purchase all of Tereo’s wheat. If that was so, then it would be easy to point to Tereo as the source for the wheat when someone died after eating bread made from it.

If Riendott was truly the man at the center of this plan, then he had purposely avoided buying Lawrence’s wheat when Lawrence passed through Enberch.

In fact, that might have been the precise moment Riendott had decided to set his plan in motion.

Darkness lay but a step ahead, and none could say where human malice might be hidden.

Lawrence sighed slowly.

He lay prone atop the hill watching the proceedings, and Holo reassumed her human form and quickly put her clothes back on.

Then the four of them took the long way around the village to Truyeo's den.

While it was possible that Iima had locked the cellar door, it was also just as possible that she had merely closed it, leaving it unlocked.

They were betting on the latter.

"Is this what you meant by God's blessing?" Holo asked.

They had won the bet.

"Is there anyone inside?"

"Nay. It's deserted," said Holo.

Since Elsa and Evan had escaped, the villagers had no further business with the church, and it was empty.

Lawrence pushed up against the pedestal. The statue of the Holy Mother tipped over and onto the floor with a clunk. The sound gave him a thrill of fear, but it was followed only by silence. He gave the pedestal a firm shove. Evan slipped through the gap that opened, and lifted the door properly open from the outside.

"Right, now...Yes, we'll need a sickle and a chalice," said Lawrence.

These were the tools needed for the plan the group was about to execute.

Now out of the cellar, Elsa gave a quick nod and ran off with Evan in tow.

Lawrence gave Holo, who remained in the basement, a small smile. "If everything goes well, you'll have all the time you want to read."

Holo seemed to give up and finally climbed the steps out of the

cellar. “So…how does it look outside?”

“The window wasn’t broken fortunately. We’ll be able to see clearly.”

Once Lawrence and company had made their escape, Iima had found an opportunity to open the front door.

The bar that had hung on the tightly closed door now leaned against a wall, unbroken.

Lawrence peered out through a crack in the window and saw that the procession had already arrived in the village square, where a man in the garments of a high-ranking clergyman—surely Bishop Van—and Riendott, the flour merchant, both confronted Elder Sem.

“Mr. Lawrence,” said Elsa. She and Evan approached from behind him as quietly as they could.

They brought a chalice that on its best day hadn’t been made of pure silver, along with a rusty old sickle.

But for demonstrating a miracle, the older and dingier the instruments, the better.

“Good. Now we just wait for the right moment.”

Elsa and Evan swallowed nervously and nodded.

Lawrence couldn’t hear what the men were saying, but given Sem’s frantic gestures, it looked like he was desperately trying to explain something to Bishop Van.

Sem would occasionally point at the church, causing everyone gathered in the square to look in its direction, which Lawrence found unnerving.

But no one approached the church since they seemed to assume it was completely empty.

Bishop Van responded to Sem calmly, occasionally pausing to consult with the elderly assistant priest at his side.

It seemed as though he considered the feelings of Elder Sem and the assembled villagers to be no more important than the wings of a fly that buzzed around his head.

When Bishop Van produced a few sheets of parchment, Elder Sem was stunned into silence.

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” Lawrence asked Holo.

“They are demanding money,” came the answer.

Just then a great clamor arose—Lawrence could see a spearman subduing a villager who had charged the proceedings.

Seeing this, several other villagers charged, though the outcome was no different.

Though their clothes were not uniform and they seemed little more than an impromptu militia, the spearmen seemed to have some discipline. They formed a ragged circle, spears out and at the ready.

“Mm. The man Sem has stopped resisting. He is beginning to yield.”

If he gave an inch, Bishop Van and Riendott would take a mile.

Bishop Van would corner Sem until nothing could help him.

“Who’s that?”

Another villager had joined the discussion. He exchanged some words with Riendott, then soon became enraged and had to be restrained by Sem.

Evan answered Lawrence’s question. “That’s the baker. He speaks ill of me the most.”

Riendott, like Bishop Van, produced a sheet of parchment from his

pocket and held it up proudly, causing the villagers to fall silent.

He seemed quite happy to have silenced them so.

"I suppose Father Franz was just too good," said Lawrence vaguely, which elicited a slight nod from Elsa.

Finally Sem fell to his knees on the stone. The villagers who had been glaring at Bishop Van now hurried to help him.

Watching this, Lawrence heard a fist being clenched.

When he looked, he saw it was Elsa.

Though her face was calm, her feelings were all too evident.

No villager had ever reached out to help her.

"They are finished. A final decision has been given," said Holo suddenly. Lawrence knew immediately what she meant.

All at once, Sem and the other villagers looked at the building opposite the church—Sem's house.

Lawrence needed only to look at their backs to know what they were thinking.

Next, two guards climbed atop the large, flat meeting stone.

In their hands, they held the idol of Truyeo that Lawrence had seen in Sem's house.

"If you but burn this abomination and embrace the true faith, all shall be resolved. If not, Tereo will be guilty of heresy," Holo said—no doubt repeating Bishop Van's words.

Sem and the rest of the people looked at the church, as though they could hear her speak.

"Humans—always depending on others in times of need," said Holo

with a sigh, stepping back from the window. “Still, I have depended on humans in my time. Shall we?”

Evan’s face made it plain that he could barely stand to forgive the selfishness of the villagers.

But he swallowed his anger and looked at Elsa.

Elsa stood quickly. “As a servant of righteousness, I cannot abandon the village,” she said shortly.

Lawrence nodded. “Let’s go.”

On that cue, the four of them opened the church’s front door.

Apparently silence could indeed descend.

That was what struck Lawrence about this particular silence.

He would never forget the imploring look that Sem gave him as he stood before the stuffed snakeskin totem of Truyeo.

“Elsa!” It was Iima who broke the silence.

Iima was not standing on the meeting stone—perhaps because she had aided Elsa—but instead watched the proceedings with the rest of the villagers. Unconcerned with the villagers’ questioning glances, she ran toward the people she had tried to protect.

“Elsa, why—”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Iima.”

Iima turned to Lawrence, her face uncomprehending.

Before Lawrence could reply, Bishop Van spoke from his place on the stone. “Goodness, what have we here? None other than Miss Elsa, the successor to Father Franz!”

“It has been some time, Bishop Van,” said Elsa.

“I was led to believe that you had snuck out of Tereo. Was the weight of your sin too much for your conscience to bear?”

“God is always forgiving.”

Bishop Van seemed momentarily cowed by Elsa’s firm answer, but he composed himself quickly and whispered something into the ear of the priest who stood next to him.

The priest cleared his throat, then produced a sheet of parchment, and holding it up, read it aloud.

“We, the Enberch Church of St. Rio, believe and declare that the village of Tereo has prayed to pagan deities and has moreover added the liquor of Khepas to their wheat in order to harm the believers of the one true faith. While believers of the one true faith suffer and die, not a single citizen of Tereo has fallen ill. As they eat of the same wheat, this can be nothing but proof that the village is protected by the evil deities they worship.”

When the priest finished his pronouncement, Bishop Van continued. “As stipulated in the contract signed with Father Franz, we will first return this wheat. Moreover, we shall reestablish a righteous holy church. As for the false servant of God, who wears the skin of a lamb but underneath is a lying serpent, she shall face the judgment of the most high God.”

When he finished, the soldiers with shields drew their swords and pointed them at Lawrence and company.

But Elsa did not take so much as a single step back. “That will not be necessary,” she said coldly. “It is true that my faith has at times been misplaced. But almighty God has shown me the true path. I have met one of His divine messengers!”

Bishop Van flinched, then glanced to the priest at his side, his brow furrowed.

The priest said something to him quietly and briefly.

Van raised one hand. “That you would claim so readily to have encountered a divine messenger is merely proof of your heresy! If I am wrong, then bring the proof before me!”

The fish had swallowed the bait.

Elsa looked first at Evan, then Holo.

The miller and the wolf girl both nodded.

“If you have doubts, let us show you!”

Evan and Holo headed straight for the wagons that were loaded with wheat, but as they approached, the spearmen prepared to stave them off.

Van gave a derisive snort. “Let them through!” he said.

Evan held in his hand a grain of wheat he had received from Holo.

Elsa watch the two of them go, then made her way to the gathering stone, ignoring Iima’s protests.

“Worship of Truyeo the serpent god is indeed a mistake,” she said.

The villagers that stood atop the meeting stone glared at Elsa as though she had forced them to swallow a rock.

“However, that mistake is not itself a fundamental one.”

She climbed the steps that led to the stone, walked directly past Bishop Van, and knelt down before the totem of Truyeo.

In the church, she had been unwilling to lie even after having been trapped by Lawrence and Holo.

She was still that girl, every inch a clergywoman.

So why did she not denounce the snake totem as a false idol, and why was she kneeling before it?

“It is my belief that Truyeo itself is one of God’s miracles.”

Sem’s eyes widened, and the villagers were visibly disturbed.

Elsa’s words neither denied nor acknowledged Truyeo.

But Van smiled. “The words of men do not keep close company with the truth. Can you prove that your words were not whispered into your ears by a demon?” he sneered.

“The divine messenger has promised to reveal a sign that will guide the wayward lambs back to the true path.”

Holo and Evan looked to Elsa. It was the signal that their preparations were done.

Even though he knew all was well, Lawrence was keenly aware of his own nervousness.

Elsa, too, must have felt the overwhelming pressure of all those gazes—the villagers’ and Bishop Van’s.

But her voice was still clear and strong.

She had inherited the teachings of Father Franz and trusted in Holo’s supernatural power, which gave her new faith in the righteousness of the God that had created the world.

“Hmph, you would presume to display the power of God…,” began Van, but his voice was drowned out by the cries of fear and surprise that arose from the people who surrounded the wagons.

“Th-the wheat, it’s—!”

The crowd’s cries crew louder.

From within the bags of wheat loaded on the wagons, ears of wheat began to sprout and grow skyward.

Sem and the rest looked on, their faces as expressionless as badly

made dolls, and Van was stunned into silence by the miracle before him.

As the wheat stalks continued to grow, the people's cries echoed throughout the square, at times sounding almost dismayed.

"It's God! God has created a miracle!" The shouting spread like wildfire, and in the end, even the clergymen bowed down.

Only Bishop Van remained standing stock-still as he took in the sight.

Another cry arose as one of the green stalks of wheat matured.

Of the wheat that sprouted in the sixteen wagons, only one wagon's wheat was different. Instead of ripening honey brown, it withered and turned to dust.

All who saw knew exactly what that meant.

Everyone's attention was focused entirely on the wheat, save Lawrence's.

He looked at the ashen-faced Riendott and at Bishop Van.

The ones responsible for poisoning the wheat could hardly laugh this miracle off.

"God has shown us the correct path," said Elsa, focusing the gaze of the crowd on herself.

"This…can't be…It's absurd…!"

"Bishop Van," said Elsa, cool and logical. "I would like you to confirm that this is not the work of a demon."

"H-how—"

"Use this," said Elsa, producing a dull metal chalice and holding it out to Van.

“Please bless this chalice. Once you have done so, Evan the miller will prove the truth of God’s teachings.”

Bishop Van did as he was asked, taking the chalice, then speaking hurriedly. “Wh-what exactly do you plan to do with this?”

“Even the poor may be baptized in God. I would have you, Bishop Van, cleanse this cup.”

Van was overwhelmed and unable to protest further. He gave the assistant priest a look of anguish. The priest in turn ordered the other clergymen to fetch some water.

They soon returned bearing water, which they handed over to Van.

Any water poured by a clergyman of the Church became holy and pure.

The chalice, now filled with holy water, shone dully in Bishop Van’s hands.

“Take the water now to the miller there,” said Elsa. She refrained from doing it herself so as to make sure he could find no fault with her.

This way, the purported righteousness of the clergy would be transferred to Evan in the very act of giving him the water.

“Watch closely,” said Elsa.

She turned to Evan and nodded. He nodded back firmly.

Evan produced a small knife and climbed atop each of the wagons, cutting open a burlap sack in each one, taking a bit of flour out of the sack, and putting it into the chalice as he went.

It was obvious to everyone what he planned to do.

All eyes were on the young wheat grinder. The villagers’ nervous gulps were almost audible.

Once he had taken flour from fifteen of the sixteen wagons, Evan took the cup, now filled with a mixture of flour and water, and raised it high.

As if pulled by strings, the eyes of the clergymen followed the chalice. They murmured something—perhaps their last prayers to God.

Evan slowly lowered the chalice, peering at its contents.

He had seen Holo's true form and knew that she was no ordinary being. He had seen stalks of wheat complete a full year's growth in but a few moments.

Evan looked suddenly away from the chalice.

His gaze fell upon none other than Elsa.

The next instant, he drank the contents of the chalice down in one great gulp.

"This is the truth of the miracle that God's messenger has revealed to us."

Evan jumped down and thrust the chalice back into the hands of the clergymen, flour still clinging to the corners of his mouth. The clergy then poured fresh water out from a water skin to purify the cup anew.

Next, Evan climbed atop the one wagon from which he had taken no flour, and removed a small amount from one of the burlap sacks, placing it in the chalice.

Elsa turned to the bishop, who was now trembling. "If this is a false miracle, then surely you will be able to demonstrate a true one."

If one had lied and claimed the wheat was poisoned, the only way to prove whether it truly was or not would be to eat all of the wheat.

However, that was speaking in purely logical terms, and miracles went beyond the purview of logic.

Only a miracle could oppose another miracle.

To prove this was not a false miracle created by a demon, the bishop would have to produce a true miracle from God.

"Bishop Van."

Elsa took the chalice from Evan and held it out to Van.

Riendott fell backward on the spot.

Van was frozen, unable to move.

He could not accept the chalice before him.

"V-very well. This…this is a miracle. A true miracle."

"And the church of this village?" came Elsa's quick demand.

Van had neither the words nor the miracle he needed to respond. "It's…legitimate," he growled. "A legitimate church."

"I'll ask you to put that in writing," said Elsa.

She finally showed a smile as she addressed Elder Sem and the villagers and reverently gathered up the totem of Truyeo.

Bishop Van could neither complain nor demand that the villagers cease their worship of Truyeo, a condition they welcomed gladly.

Elsa had performed admirably.

Though beneath the thin layer of courage that had let her confront Bishop Van without hesitation, uncertainty and fear surely swirled within her.

She took a deep, deep breath; wiped the corners of her eyes; and

bowed her head, her hands clasped in prayer.

Though it was impossible to know whether she was praying to God or to Father Franz, either one would have praised her actions.

Holo came running to Lawrence's side. He had been watching her as a spectator would.

"What say you? Impressive, no?" prodded Holo proudly, standing in stark contrast to Elsa, who remained humble despite having served Bishop Van his comeuppance.

But their differences corresponded exactly to the differences between Lawrence and Evan.

Evan shoved the chalice into the hands of one of the clergymen before running over to Elsa and embracing her tightly.

Lawrence's gaze, along with the villagers', was drawn in by the sight. Holo sniffed her displeasure.

"You seem quite envious."

Lawrence saw the challenge in Holo's smile as she said this. Afraid, he could only shrug. "Aye, quite envious."

Holo appeared taken aback by the unexpected reply.

"Envious because I was behind the scenes the whole time. Elsa and Evan were onstage. You sprung the trap."

This was a successful diversion.

Holo sighed, her expression one of disappointment. "Still, the issue of coin has not yet been settled. That job falls to you, does it not?"

"It does. Although…"

Lawrence took the situation in and thought it over.

The tables had been turned.

The mouse had managed to bite the cat. It might as well try to come away with some meat, Lawrence felt.

As the scene changed before his eyes so did his ideas.

In his mind, Lawrence put together a plan that he would never dare try in any other town. It made him feel slightly sadistic.

"Indeed. I suppose this might be worth trying," he said to himself, unconsciously stroking his beard. He became aware of Holo's gaze on him.

She was looking up at him, clearly surprised.

It was rare to see her genuinely surprised. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Heh...are you sure you are not a wolf yourself?"

The statement was so disconnected to anything that he couldn't help looking dumbfounded. "Huh?"

Holo chuckled, her fangs showing. "That face might suit you a bit better."

"..."

Lawrence withdrew at this point, worried that continuing would only lead him to fall into yet another of Holo's traps. Holo did not push the subject, evidently satisfied with just a bit of teasing.

In any case, their usual banter would have to wait.

There was still business to take care of and revenge to be had.

Bishop Van and the rest of the people from Enberch were descending from the meeting stone, heading over to Sem's house to draw up some documents. Lawrence jogged over to them.

“They may go with Sem to settle matters of religion, but you, Mr. Riendott—you have matters of coin to attend to,” he said.

Riendott looked like a criminal who had been unable to escape capture.

Bishop Van did not know Lawrence and was about to demand to know who he was when Sem, having listened to a short whispered comment from Elsa, spoke softly to him.

A surprised “ah” was all the bishop could manage.

Likewise, the villagers regarded Lawrence with suspicion until hearing Sem’s explanation. Their expressions of surprise were different from Van’s, but eventually they nodded begrudgingly.

Holo whispered in Lawrence’s ear, “It seems he is willing to leave everything to you.”

Lawrence had gone from being suspected as the villain who’d poisoned the village’s wheat to the man responsible for negotiating on that same village’s behalf.

Remaining there on the meeting stone, Riendott seemed painfully aware of the fact that he had set Lawrence up. He looked like he was about to cry.

The stone was still surrounded by villagers, and even the people from Enberch discussed the miracle in excited tones.

In this atmosphere, the negotiations would be simple.

“Well then, Mr. Riendott.”

“Er, yes!” came his hoarse reply. It was hard to tell whether he was deliberately trying to elicit sympathy or not.

By the way Holo coughed and glared at the man, his actions were probably an act.

“I have been asked by Miss Elsa and the village elder to conduct all financial negotiations. I would first ask whether every villager here can accept those terms.”

“If the village elder says so, I don’t see that we have a choice,” said one villager.

The baker piped up next, scratching his head. “We’ve always left everything to do with coin to the elder.”

Lawrence nodded. “There it is, then. I shall begin with the greatest demand. I would have you keep the wheat.”

Riendott sputtered, “Th-that’s preposterous! I couldn’t possibly!”

“Why is that?”

“Th-the reputation of the wheat! After all, a man has died! My shop’s reputation has been damaged!”

Given everything else, the story of a death had also probably been a lie.

Lawrence looked at Holo. Her eyes asked him what he wanted to do. Yes, the dead man was a lie surely.

But there was nothing to be gained in exposing it. That could even prove fatal.

“And besides—besides!” continued Riendott. “It’s written in the contract with Father Franz that any wheat touched by Khepas liquor will be returned!”

This was an obvious position for him to take, and the villagers could hardly argue this point.

Even if they suspected Riendott himself of planting the poison in the wheat, they could prove nothing.

“Very well, then. Suppose we accept the returned wheat. What

would the price be?”

Riendott took a deep breath upon hearing Lawrence’s concession, as though he was finally breaking the surface after having been trapped underwater.

“T-two hundred *lim—*”

“That’s absurd!” cried the baker, grabbing Riendott by his collar. “That’s the price you paid us originally, you bastard!”

It was true—Riendott must have sold off at least some of the wheat already, so he could hardly demand the same amount back.

Moreover, if that was the amount the village truly owed, the people would still be short a full seventy *limar*.

Lawrence couldn’t help admiring Riendott’s sheer nerve, quoting the highest possible price even in these circumstances.

“F-f-fine then…O-one hundred ninety—”

The baker tightened his grip, but Lawrence stopped him.

His intention was not, however, to save Riendott.

“Mr. Riendott, if another miracle was to happen, that would be quite disadvantageous for you, would it not?”

The villagers did not understand the true meaning behind these words, but thanks to Holo seeing through Riendott’s lie, Lawrence knew what worried the man most.

What he feared most was that Enberch’s lie would be exposed.

Riendott’s face looked like a drowning pig’s. “O-one h-hundred… six…ty…”

In *trenni* silver, this came to a concession of eight hundred pieces.

The baker loosened his grip.

Lawrence watched Riendott cough; this was probably the limit of how much the man could afford to concede.

Pushing further would only serve to create more resentment.

After all, the contract between Tereo and Enberch had been abnormal to begin with.

“In that case, let us settle the return at that amount. Let all present bear witness.”

Each villager nodded, and Riendott finally looked up.

Now came the crux of the matter.

Though Lawrence had extracted a significant concession, it still was not a sum that the village could afford to repay. In order to prevent this whole farce from repeating itself, a more proper contract needed to be established.

“Incidentally Mr. Riendott,” said Lawrence.

“Y-yes?”

“Regarding this returned wheat—I presume it would not be possible to persuade you to repurchase it.”

Riendott immediately shook his head. He would ruin his business in such a transaction.

“Understood. However, according to Elder Sem, the village does not have enough cash to buy back the wheat. Even at one hundred sixty *limar*, there is still not enough.”

The villagers raised their voices in surprise.

Evidently the elder had hidden this truth from them in order to avoid a panic.

“Thus I have a proposal for you,” continued Lawrence before the villagers could pounce on Riendott.

“Wh-what do you…?”

“It is but a simple thing. I would ask that you persuade the bishop to allow the village to sell wheat under his name.”

Riendott thought hard, obviously trying to see what Lawrence hoped to gain in such a deal.

He would not figure it out, though, Lawrence was confident.

“I-if you plan to sell to another wheat broker…you had best give up as—”

“Why?!” shouted the baker, causing Riendott to recoil in fear briefly. His look made it clear that this was not something under his control.

“It’s been a good harvest this year…There’s a surplus of rye. No matter where you look, no town can possibly buy the amount this village is looking to sell. To preserve trust, we’ve already bought all we could…”

Despite its purported poisoning being a lie, the wheat now had a history. Merchants would avoid it if they could.

“No, even if that’s true, it will not matter,” said Lawrence. “So, will you do us this favor?”

Riendott looked at Lawrence beseechingly, then nodded slowly.

He seemed at once to be begging for God’s grace and praying that a miracle would not occur. It was a strange sight.

“I-I s-suppose that would be a-acceptable…”

“One more thing.”

“Wha—”

“It is possible that the people of Enberch may try to cause trouble with the business I am planning. I would ask that you be our ally in such a case.”

Riendott’s mouth dropped open. “Ah—surely you don’t plan to make bread!”

“Close, but no. The bakers would never allow such a thing, would they?”

Riendott managed to nod despite his fleshy chin.

Still, it was true that Lawrence’s plan was very near to a bread baker’s business.

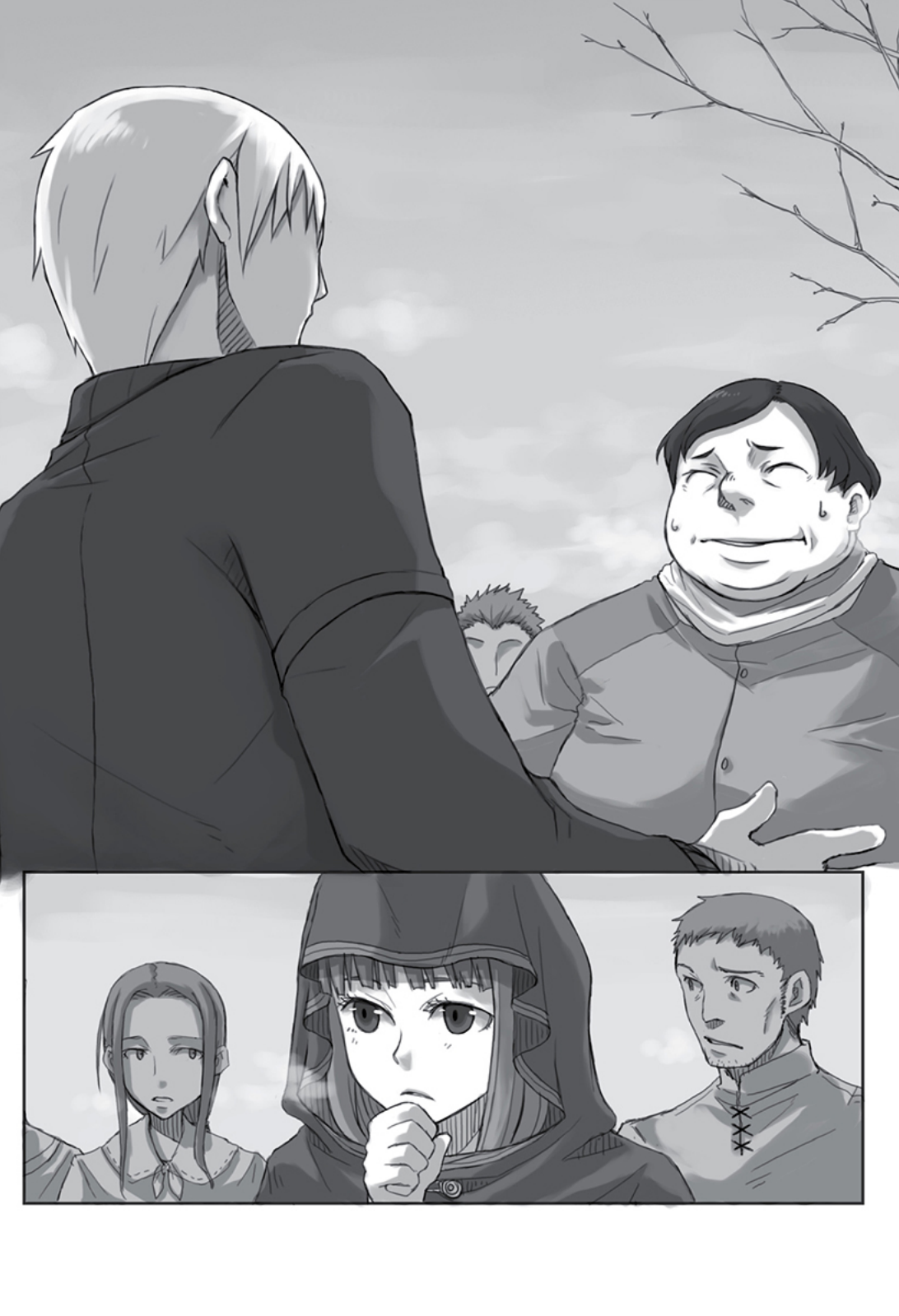
“Also, regarding payment, it will have to wait until the business is moving along well,” said Lawrence.

“What—what are you—”

“I certainly won’t force anything upon you. I’ll even add a condition you may well find attractive.” Lawrence looked over at the assembled villagers, then back to Riendott. “What would you say to dissolving Father Franz’s contract—the contract that requires Enberch to unconditionally purchase Tereo’s wheat?”

The villagers instantly raised their voices in protest. “Hey, you can’t do that just because you’re negotiating for us!” said one.

“Ah, but so long as this condition remains, it will be a source of resentment on Enberch’s part, is that not so?”



It was a difficult question to answer, but Riendott, the largest wheat merchant in all of Enberch, finally nodded.

"This was never a normal contract to begin with. Normally a village has one of its citizens who's good with money take charge of such things—that's business," said Lawrence.

Riendott nodded emphatically but soon shrank back at the angry glares he received.

"What say you, Mr. Riendott? Will you agree?"

"Hey! You can't just—!" came the protests, but Lawrence did not back down.

He was confident that he would be able to turn a large profit here.

"If Mr. Riendott and Bishop Van are on our side, I can tell you a way for this village to create a business that will turn wonderful profits," said Lawrence with a smile.

His confidence was disarming; the villagers backed down.

"What-what kind of business…?" asked one.

Lawrence enjoyed the moment of superiority and then explained. "I suppose I'll tell you. You'll need some cooperation from the baker."

A bit surprised, the baker nodded.

"Then can you make ready some eggs and butter? And honey if you have it."

All present looked at once amazed and confused.

It was Holo alone who spoke. "It sounds like something rather tasty shall come from all this."

EPILOGUE



EPILOGUE

After finishing the packing of their traveling gear and returning to the church's living quarters, Lawrence could hear a loud crunching sound.

The sound, like footsteps upon a gravel path, was probably Holo eating.

He didn't know how many times he had told her not to eat while reading, but she never listened.

Elsa, too, would scold Evan any time she caught him eating and dropping crumbs everywhere, shaking her head with a sigh.

Occasionally during such times, Elsa and Lawrence's eyes would meet, and they would share a long-suffering smile.

It had been three days since the conflict between Enberch and Tereo ended.

Given the outcome, the deal Lawrence had struck was a great success.

Tereo had wound up owing Enberch thirty-seven *limar*—over seven hundred *trenni* pieces. However, with the agreement that Lawrence had arranged with Riendott, Tereo would not only pay the debt off, but also stood to make money from Riendott.

Lawrence had used the village's wheat and the baker's assistance to make cookies.

They were not dissimilar to unleavened bread, which was made with flour and water but without the yeast that caused regular bread

to rise. Adding butter and eggs to this unleavened bread mixture, however, created something surprisingly delicious.

Cookies were common in the south, but for whatever reason, Lawrence had never seen them in the north.

Having discovered during a dinner with Elsa and Evan that they were unfamiliar with the different types of bread in the world, Lawrence had been convinced that the villagers would not know of cookies—and he had been right.

Cookies looked nothing like bread. While the baker's guild strictly prohibited other businesses from baking and selling bread, foodstuffs aside from bread fell outside the scope of its rule.

Though the baker's guild would surely protest, as long as the villagers had the support of Riendott and Bishop Van, theirs would remain a mutually beneficial relationship.

Cookies being a rare and delicious product, they sold well in Enberch. They sold *so* well that it seemed possible for the purported surplus of rye wheat to be insufficient for demand.

However, business of this sort could easily be copied, so it was only in the beginning that large profits would come with relative ease.

So it was that Lawrence had not demanded a share of the profits. Instead he had asked the villagers to buy the wheat he carried in his cart with a bit of extra coin included by way of apology.

If the people of Tereo planned to turn the cookies into a local specialty, they had a lot of hard work before them.

But the cookies' deliciousness, at least, was guaranteed.

After all, in the three days since the end of the dispute, Holo had eaten nothing else.

To any who ate the cookies for the first time, their taste and texture

could be addictive.

"Well then, it's about time to be off," said Lawrence.

Holo was happily spilling crumbs all over the pages of one of Father Franz's books. She looked up, annoyed at the light tap Lawrence had given her.

Elsa was right outside the church, praying intensely over Lawrence's cart for a safe journey while Elder Sem and the villagers had decided on their own to pray to Truyeo that Lawrence's business would thrive.

The villagers' attitude toward the church had changed. Some had even begun attending services out of gratitude.

No doubt in the future, Tereo would worship two gods.

Holo stood up from the chair in which she sat, grabbing a cookie from a mountain of the same on the table and holding it between her teeth.

"You know we have piles of those things in the cart. If this is like when you bought so many apples we could hardly eat them all, you'll have naught but cookies for every meal," warned Lawrence.

Holo took a bite out of the cookie with a loud crunch, regarding Lawrence with irritation. "Uh, just who was it, I wonder, that separated the good wheat from the bad and created that miracle? Had I not been there, you would've been tossed naked into a cauldron and boiled alive."

It pained Lawrence to hear it, but Holo had been eating cookies at an absurd rate—even the villagers, who felt they owed her a great debt, were stunned into silence by the sight of her devouring the treats.

He felt he could warn her a bit without risking retribution.

“Mmph,” Holo continued. “We surely met with calamity this time around.”

It was a forced change of subject, but she was not wrong.

“Well, at least we turned a profit in the end.”

“Is that all you care about?” laughed Holo, her cheeks stuffed with cookie. “For my part, I cannot say that my hopes were met, but I did well enough. I suppose it was worth the effort.”

She looked at the book that recorded the tales of the Moon-Hunting Bear—which she had now read fully three times—and sighed. “So, where are we going next?”

“Lenos. There’s a legend there in which you personally appear.”

“Mm. I suppose it would be a bother to get caught in snow because we dragged our feet. We’d best get on with it.”

Lawrence knew that Holo’s true desire was to head north as soon as possible, but when he considered the journey that lay ahead, it was no wonder that the idea of lounging about in a suddenly comfortable village was appealing.

He was somewhat surprised that she was ready to go after just three days.

“Shall we?” she said.

“Quite.”

As soon as Lawrence and Holo emerged from the church, the villagers gathered to send them off.

Gloomy apologies like “Sorry we doubted you” were long since done with.

All that remained were happy wishes for safe travel.

“May God’s blessing go with you,” said Elsa, a gentle smile on her face.

This was enough to make a man happy—which Lawrence was despite the foot stomp he received from Holo.

“Mr. Lawrence,” said Evan, holding Elsa’s hand. “Thank you for teaching me so much. I’ll work hard here.”

It was the constant suspicion of the villagers that had made Evan want to leave the village to become a merchant.

Things had changed now, though, and Evan chose to stay in the village and take responsibility for future negotiations with Enberch.

Elsa and Evan’s hands were tightly clasped together. His decision to stay had obviously been the right one as anyone could tell.

“A traveler does not leave regret behind in a village, but good memories. Farewell!”

Lawrence gripped the reins, and the horse began its amble.

Wrapped in the faint sunlight of winter, the wagon clattered its way out of the small village of Tereo.

Elsa, Evan, and Sem all waved from where they stood in front of the church, and even Lawrence looked back twice to wave.

But their forms soon shrank and disappeared.

Lawrence’s travels with Holo had begun again.

Their destination was Lenos.

From there, they would head northeast.

It would be just around the end of spring at the opening of summer, Lawrence mused, when they would finally arrive in Yoitsu.

As Lawrence thought this over, Holo immediately took a bag of cookies out and dug in.

The solemn, contemplative atmosphere that came with newly begun travel was shattered by the crunching of cookies.

"Hm?" Holo looked up questioningly, her mouth full of cookies, and Lawrence decided her blank face had its own charms.

The smile he had upon seeing her innocent face soon evaporated. "Summer," he murmured to himself.

Immediately thereafter, he noticed something approaching his face. He looked to find it was a cookie. "Don't look at me so desirously," she said sourly.

"I've had plenty, thanks," said Lawrence.

Holo did not relent. "Your face says otherwise." She shoved the cookie at him again.

Lawrence gave up and accepted it, taking a bite.

A particularly large amount of honey had been added to the cookies that the village had given Holo so they were quite sweet.

Such things were not at all bad once in a while, he mused.

Yet Holo still looked at him, somehow dissatisfied.

"What?"

"Nothing," said Holo, looking ahead and taking another bite of her cookie.

She obviously wanted to say something—but what?

Lawrence thought this over, and it came to him.

Oh, but that—that was too unfair.

She wanted to make him say it—it was a trap.

And yet if he did not fall into the trap, she was sure to be angry.

There was nothing to be done.

Lawrence made his decision, popped the last piece of cookie into his mouth, and spoke.

“Hey.”

“Mm?”

Holo turned toward him, the picture of innocence.

Her tail swished expectantly beneath her robes.

Lawrence played along with her ridiculous farce.

“There’s some business where there’s good money to be made,” he said.

“Oh?”

“It’ll take us out of our way, though.”

Holo made an exaggeratedly irritated face and sighed.

Yet she did not ask for any further details, simply smiling in a vaguely resigned fashion. “I suppose it cannot be helped. I shall accompany you.”

Holo did not want their journey to end.

Lawrence believed this—and it was precisely because she didn’t want it to end that she affected this attitude.

She would never have admitted this, though.

What a charmless girl.

“So, tell me about this business,” she said with a happy smile.

Lawrence chewed his last piece of cookie and thanked whatever god had given him this bittersweet sensation.

AFTERWORD



AFTERWORD

Hello! It has been quite a while. I am Isuna Hasekura, and this is the fourth volume.

What's more, this makes it a full year since *Spice and Wolf* debuted. Time certainly does fly.

It seems like just the other day I was going to the Twelfth Dengeki Novel Prize party, dressed in a suit and desperately nervous— and just recently I attended the Thirteenth.

Time has moved so fast, in fact, that I didn't have time to get my suit cleaned and wound up going in my civvies. That's the reason why there in the sea of suits and ties was me, wandering around in my dingy jeans. The roast beef was excellent.

Speaking of which, the year-end party for Dengeki Publishing is coming up in a couple of weeks, and I cannot wait to see what delicious things they'll serve. I really want to bring along some Tupperware to take leftovers home with me, but it's been only a year since my debut, and I'm thinking that's the kind of thing I shouldn't do until I'm a more established veteran.

It's so beautiful in my mind: I'll grow a beard, smoke a pipe, and wave my cane around as I swagger into the hall, making for the sushi table and taking it home with me. Part of me says that my idea of a veteran author is a little off, but I've decided not to worry about it. Oh yeah—I can't forget to bring some pickled ginger back with the sushi. I'd be a failure as a gentleman otherwise.

Now that I've filled some space, some thanks are due.

To Jyuu Ayakura-sensei, whose illustrations have once again turned out just as I have imagined them, my sincere thanks. When I was looking at the roughs, there would be a single character who would look too much like I imagined him, and I would have to laugh.

My deep thanks likewise go to my esteemed editor, Koetsu-sama, for carefully checking my shaky manuscripts. If they made me do that job myself, I'd probably give up halfway through. Thank you so much.

And to all of you who now hold this book in your hands, my deepest thanks. I hope that you also enjoy the next volume.

I shall see you then.

Isuna Hasekura

Isuna Hasekura Born December 27, 1982. Winner of the Twelfth Dengeki Novel Prize Silver Medal. Studying physics at college, he's a romantic who up until recently believed that the sky was blue because it was reflecting the color of the ocean. He remains undecided on negative ions and oxygenated water.

Works from Dengeki Bunko: *Spice and Wolf*

Spice and Wolf II

Spice and Wolf III

Spice and Wolf IV

Jyuu Ayakura Born 1981. Birthplace: Kyoto. Blood Type: AB. Currently living a free, Spartan life in Tokyo, he has been thus far unsuccessful in putting his temple-hiking plans into action